

In Conversation: Bryony Gillard and Irene Aristizábal

18 June 2021 at Jerwood Space as part of Jerwood Solo Presentations 2021

Irene Aristizábal: Good evening all. It's really good to see you. Thank you for joining us for our first event in person, for both of us and for Jerwood Space as well. It's great to be in conversation with you Bryony. We had met a few years ago in Bristol, and we really enjoyed the conversation together. So it was really great to have the invitation from Jerwood Arts to chat this evening.

And I guess we wanted to give your sense of Bryony's process and inspiration and intention with the film and just to untangle different aspects of the work. And we really hope for this evening to be very conversational. We're a small group of people, so it would be great to hear your voices as well, with questions, comments, thoughts. Yeah. Do you want to say anything before we start?

Bryony Gillard: No. No, I don't want to say anything. Thank you so much for being here. I'm really delighted to be sharing this space with you all and thank you so much Irene for sharing the space with me and doing this event, it's great.

Irene Aristizábal: So you produce the film during the pandemic, which was quite a major challenge I imagine for you in your process that you had already started a few months before. Can you tell us more about how this context affected the way you worked, the process and the end result in the film?

Bryony Gillard: Yeah, sure. Yeah, so in a variety of ways, and yeah, we talked a little bit about this at the panel discussion that we did at the start of the run of the show. So apologies if anyone's already heard that and I'm repeating myself, I try not to. I mean, so the main thing that COVID changed for us, the duration that we had in order to prepare for the show. So normally Jerwood Solo Presentations is quite a kind of short timeframe to produce work. That's kind of one of the ideas behind it, it's kind of quite a fast-paced opportunity.

So it's normally around six months and the pandemic meant it ended up being, I don't know, more like 18 months, which for me was actually a real opportunity because I work quite slowly anyway. And I think that amount of time allowed me to kind of distil and unpack the ideas that I wanted to explore. So that was kind of, yeah, one of the major things was the duration the production took. Also, I guess yeah, certain restrictions kind of framed and changed the decisions that I made in terms of my approach to the film. So I already knew because... So when I thought it was going to be a short turnaround, I knew that I wanted to try a slightly different way of working.

So normally I invite other people to work with me on a project, I bring them together normally in a physical space and we worked together to explore and unpack ideas, have conversations, undertake exercises together, yeah, and make content together. Whereas I knew with this film, because it was much shorter timeframe. I wouldn't necessarily be able to develop those

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kinds of group relationships. So I was always intending to work with people on a kind of more one-on-one basis.

But obviously, because COVID happened, those kind of individual relationships had to happen across great distances. So that was one of the reasons I ended up deciding to, for the majority of the people that I worked with on this project, are all people who I hold as very dear and close friends, or members of my family, because it felt important to start from a place where we had a shared understanding already, we had a relationship, so there was something already there to build on.

So that was a factor. And then also at the same time, and this is from something that will come up in other conversations, I was actually really unwell myself. So I was diagnosed with some very large, benign tumours and I was waiting for surgery for a lot of the pandemic. And because the pandemic happened, my surgery kept getting delayed and delayed so my period of ill health expanded, and I was in a kind of a state of limbo. So at the same time as making this project, I was also a lot of the time, really poorly, and spending a lot of time at home. So that also really, really framed the decisions I made in terms of where I was filming, at my house mostly. And the ideas and concepts behind the film were really, really framed by the lived experience at the time. So yes, so that was also kind of a factor.

And also, yeah, because of what was going on I also had to have, and again, this is something that I said in our panel discussion, because the film is in a lot of ways, dealing with loss and grief and experience of illness, and how that affects our relationship to each other, but also our experience of time and temporality, because of what was happening globally, and the kind of the overwhelming grief that all of us were feeling there were times when I had to put it down, and had to walk away from it because it was just too difficult and too raw.

So the period of production was very much kind of stopping and starting. And in some ways that was yeah, really, really tricky, and it was really hard to be unpacking some of those ideas during that time. But also in other ways it was quite healing and cathartic and also because we have this expanded timeframe, it was really amazing to be able to, rather than be pressured, to have a deadline and make something towards it to be able to step away, that felt like a really massive privilege actually.

So yeah, so all of those things kind of, yeah, completely framed the work. And I think obviously the themes in the film can be really seen in that kind of post-COVID lens, which was obviously never the intention, but of course it's the context that we're in.

Irene Aristizábal:

Absolutely. So timely and in a strange way it becomes more important within the context. You mentioned at some point the fact that you started working from home and sort of that space shifted for it to become also the space of production, but also space of encounter. And in particular, an encounter with a Fox, with your visitor. Can you tell us more about that

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particular character in the film? And I guess it would be good to continue a conversation around those main characters.

There's five in particular, the moon, the water, the water system, this character who is your sister that is a medical practitioner, we don't really need to know much more, and the singer, that opera singer that we can hear, but yeah, that encounter with the fox, this magical animal, we both had that... Well, as many people, that attraction for the being, and how did you shape that relationship with them? And, yeah.

Bryony Gillard:

Yeah. Yeah, so that all happened kind of quite organically. So when I started making this project, I knew that I wanted to make a work that was engaging with grief I'd experienced myself. So I lost my mum five years ago next week, and that was a really deep and traumatic loss in my life, and subsequently I've had an awful lot of conversations with different people and done a lot of research into grief and loss.

So I knew that there was a lot of stuff in the film that I wanted to explore around that experience and how that had changed me, and how, again, that had changed my experience time. And Foxy, which is what we call the fox in our neighbourhood, Foxy wasn't necessarily, from the outset, going to be in the film. He wasn't a kind of a core part of it, it all sort of happened very organically. So around the time that I was really poorly and spending a lot of time at home, an adolescent fox started coming into our garden every day. Our neighbour was feeding him, we weren't feeding him. But he became very, very curious and interested in us, all the humans, living in the kind of row of houses that I live in Central Bristol, in a very, very urban environment, but there's a kind of a small pocket of tiny gardens behind the flat that we live in, and this became in his territory.

So seeing Foxy every day became, actually when I was really unwell, a real highlight to my days. Yeah, it was a way of marking time, he would generally always come at the same time of day. And having this relationship with this more than human creature was a really amazing and exciting and really beneficial thing to me at that time in my life. And then, so during the pandemic, we were spending more time at home anyway, he was around a lot more. I spent an awful amount of time observing him, just spending time with him, just exploring what he was doing.

He's extremely interested in humans, but also in objects, and would often bring us objects that he, and this is quite a common thing if anyone has red foxes in their neighbourhoods, they bring things. They bring dog toys, they bring shoes, they bring all sorts of interesting things that they find, and they play with them in a very joyful and dog-like way. So I knew that after a while... I started filming him, my partner, and I started filming him, my partner works with me on the filming in the projects I do. We started filming him and I quite quickly realized there was maybe something kind of interesting to unpack and explore in relation to the themes that I want to explore with this particular project in terms of, I kind of yeah, his wildness, his vulnerability, his proximity to humans and domesticity, but also the kind

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of tension between tenderness and violence in the way that he would interact with us but also with objects.

So, yeah, so we just started filming him to see what would happen and then slowly started to introduce different objects to him. And a certain point, I decided that it might be interested to see if he would interact with objects which were kind of human, but not quiet. So in film there are these prosthetic limbs, and he was really, really, really interested and curious in them. And it was a way to start, and maybe we can talk about this a bit more at another point in the conversation, but it was a way to start to think about... So I was thinking a lot about fragmented bodies and fragmented systems, and estrangement with oneself, or estrangement with the world that perhaps can help him when we have experienced traumatic loss, or when our bodies are being disobedient.

And I think there's something quite interesting in the way that Foxy is interacting with those objects in terms of kind of thinking about that this association and that estrangement. So that's a long-winded way of saying it kind of started as a sort of a happy playful accident, and then became a way of kind of thinking and talking about those ideas in the film. And yeah, and working with a protagonist during COVID safely, because obviously we didn't need to wear masks and he was very, very comfortable not adhering to social distancing let's say. He would come very, very close to us.

Irene Aristizábal:

It's really interesting how it starts from an encounter and from getting to know each other and how that relationship also introduces that estrangement and that disconnection that is so present when we experience illness and when we experience loss as well. And I think it's something that is very much present in the way you worked on the sound of the film. And maybe you can talk a little bit more about that and in relation to the different voices that are present.

But also, I think it's really interesting how your choice of song. So maybe you can tell us a little bit more about that and how yeah, sound is so present in relation to water, nature, but also the machines that we can hear and the reality of distortion that is presented through the poems as well. Yeah.

Bryony Gillard:

Yeah, yeah. So I have so much to say about that. So yeah, maybe firstly, it's probably worth mentioning, so this is... I guess it does have music in it, but this is maybe the first moving-image that I've made where soundtrack and kind of very loud frenetic sound isn't that present. The previous two works I made, firstly, the editing pace is very, very frenetic, but also in terms of the sound and the soundtrack and the way the sound is spatialized, it's very, very intense. Whereas with this, I knew I wanted to make something was quieter and used more, in terms of field recording, so as you said the water, the sounds of the garden, the birds, there's just this kind of this gentle soundtrack, which is yeah, carried out throughout the film.

But then in terms of the voice and the song, so the voice belongs to an amazing artist, Nik Rawlings, an artist and a singer. And that's I guess to say Nik is one of the, kind of the key kind of contributors to the film. And I'd

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been very interested Nik's practice for a long time, and we'd had a few conversations about experiences that we'd had in our own lives, in relation to the things I wanted to explore in this project. And around that time, I also discovered that... So alongside their sound practice and the... So they have a sound practice and they've also worked as a DJ for many years, they also have a singing practice and subsequently, very, very recently have returned to classical singing as something that they did as a teenager, and was a really big part of their life, but left it behind and have come back to it as an adult, as someone who's comfortable with themselves.

And so I'd heard a few kind of voice recordings of Nik and Nik particularly is interested in yeah, singing kind of choral compositions and Baroque music, and so the song in the film is by a composer from the 1600s called John Dowland. He wrote a lot of very dramatic, very sad music. The songs called Sorrow Stay, and if you can't decipher the lyrics from the singing if you've seen the subtitled version, it's a song about just absolute desolate misery and sadness. And it's just incredibly dramatic.

And I wanted that to be a sort of contrast between... So a lot of the footage in the film is potentially quite banal. So there's this footage of this water treatment plant, the sewage works that I filmed in Cornwall where I'm from, which is kind of yeah, just quite banal and quite boring and not an awful lot happens. I was quite interested in there being a kind of contrast between some of this banal footage and the domestic space that my sister's sitting reading, and then this very kind of high drama voice, but also there's an extreme vulnerability to the tone, the quality, the timbre of Nik's voice.

And they also... No, sorry I said this in the panel discussion as well but I think it's important. They supplied the recordings to me dry, so without any reverb, and in the process of editing, I quickly realized that it was really important to keep those recordings really, really dry so that it was just this very singular, lonely voice in a space. So yeah, that's where they came from. But also, and I think we were talking about this before, there's something pretty contemporary about the composition of the song and that particular refrain of pity that comes again and again, and obviously in the process of editing, I've played around with the structure of the song. I've taken some liberties and I hope John Dowland isn't too annoyed about me doing that.

But yeah, that's where some of that comes from, but in terms of sound in my practice, sound's incredibly important. I think there's a similarity in the way that both Freya Dooley and I talk about sound as something which we're fascinated by, in terms of its leakiness, it's qualities to be kind of evasive and slippery and creep out into spaces and ideas and concepts. And in terms of the way that I edit, so I didn't learn video editing at art school, I taught myself in probably quite a backward way. But I generally always, for me, sound is kind of, rather than an image, sound is where I always start.

Sound is where I kind of build the foundations for the way I put a piece of work together. So it's kind of, yeah, for me, it's kind of more, yeah, more central than the image in some ways.

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Irene Aristizábal:

And you can really feel it. The sound is so visceral in your work, in your practice in general, but in here, it's not only through that materiality of sound that we can feel in our bodies and that bring us back to how we feel in ourselves, but also the way that sound through the voice and the language that is present, the language has a... How to say? It sort of mirrors the sound itself in this work, if that makes sense? I don't know if... Yeah. It's in those poems and those texts that are very haptic and tactile.

In a section, there is your sister reading a section of Anne Boyer's, *The Undying*, and it's this quite strong, I would even say, violent, description of when a cancer patient is losing their hair and how that can become an act of resistance in itself. And we can almost hear the hair out of the head, but also, I don't know, falling on the floor. So she describes how when your hair is falling, you should take it to your doctor in... It really has micro-moments of resistance and yeah, maybe it's a good moment to speak about Boyer's text and why was it so important for you to bring it in there into the film?

And also, why did you choose to have your sister read it, and what is the significance of that?

Bryony Gillard:

So I'll probably start with by saying sometimes in my research process, I start off by myself trying to figure out what I want to do, which I guess is quite ordinary. And so with this project, I knew that I really wanted to kind of think about philosophy of illness, or I was reading about text around the philosophy of illness, but I was also reading autopathography, or we could call it sick lit, and a lot of crip theory. And on my reading journey, I came across Anne Boyer's book, *The Undying*, and it absolutely blew my mind. And I really absolutely encourage anyone who hasn't read it already to go out and buy it from an independent bookshop and have a brutal and horrifying, but important nourishing reading journey with that text.

So I read Anne Boyer's, *The Undying*, and for me, yeah. I mean, it just articulates the rage and the fury that she felt having triple negative breast cancer and undertaking medical care in a private health care system in the US, and the intersections of class politics, gender, and race around medical care, and also around the cancer industry. And so I lost my mom to cancer, as I said, I had these kind of these things growing in my body, which were tumors, and there was something about that happening to me, which made me think a lot more about my mum's experience of cancer.

So even though this work isn't explicitly about cancer, it's something that I'm particularly interested in and I'm really interested in kind of unpacking it within theory and philosophy and discourse. Yeah, so it was a text that felt really, really informative and important to making this project. It's a text that defies genres in terms of it shifts between lots of different registers of writing. Anne Boyer's a poet, but this book sits as something quite unique. I mean, I could just sit here for an hour and talk about how magnificent it is.

But the excerpt text that I use in the film, so I wrote reams and reams and reams in response to making this project. And there is some of my writing in the film, but I early on realized that because I wanted to work with others

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and I have all these amazing contributors to the film, I also wanted to have a dialogue with the writers that I was reading. Including their work in the film was a way of me in some ways, having a conversation with these amazing people, dead and alive. Boyer is thankfully very much alive.

And so the text that I chose is called... Hang on, let me just get the title, right. It's called Communiqué, and let me just find it, because I really, really want to get it right. Do I have it here? Maybe I don't. We can edit the text. Communiqué from an Exurban Satellite Clinic of a Cancer Pavilion Named after a Financier. And to me it reads like a kind of instructive text, it's like an action. So Anne Boyer talks about the poet, Diane di Prima and her revolutionary letter, this amazing collection of poems, which again, if you haven't read, go out and read them because they're amazing, amazing piece of work.

So she references Diane di Prima in the book, and then there's just this section which is like this kind of, as you were saying, these instructions, these actions to take your disassembling, your fragmented body, your body that is falling apart, and use it as an act of protest, and use it against the people that have harmed you and the systems that have harmed, and you use your body as a weapon.

And there was a certain point when I was like, "Well, I can't write anything in response that's going to match the power of that text." And I feel like I really, in order to be in conversation with this writer and this piece of writing, it needs to be in there. So that's why I decided to have a reading, and that's why there's a lot of readings and texts in the film.

And my decision to ask my amazing sister, Becky to read it came from... So this is a kind of a sub-text and it's not important to your reading of the film, and it's not massively present in the text, the information texts about the film. So my sister Becky midwife, the background of that is that she was actually doing her training when our mum died, so there's this kind of relationship to her going back as a mature student and getting her nursing qualification, her midwife qualification, whilst we were experiencing this loss in our lives. So she's been working as a midwife through this pandemic.

For me, I think there's an interesting relationship to have someone in the film who is bringing lives in the world against this kind of backdrop of loss and grief, but it's not necessary for you to know what her uniform particularly describes for me, it's just important that it's a care uniform, it's a very kind of generic blue nurse's uniform. She's sitting there with her NHS lanyard on in her front room with her Labrador. And yeah, so in terms of why I decided and why I asked her to read this particular text was I'm interested in... And in the research that I've done, I'm interested in thinking about medical gaze.

And as someone who's been a patient and someone who's kind of done a lot of research into what it might mean in different situations to be within the medical gaze and how often problematic that can be. But also obviously we are living in a country with a health care system which is incredible and

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amazing and we're so lucky, but has been systematically defunded and disassembled since 1979. So the whole of my life, since Thatcherism, our healthcare system has been fragmented, is being fragmented. And Boyer's text is almost like a kind of cautionary tale for what our future potentially is looking like.

And so all of this stuff is important for me, whether or not it's readable, legible in work I've made isn't that important to me, but there was something about, especially considering everything that was going on last year and the conversations I was having with my sister about how difficult her job was, it felt kind of important to yeah, to ask her to read in her uniform, in the uniform she has for her job, rather than sitting there as a kind of a citizen. And the kind of relationship that I have to her as a family member, but also she is someone who is in a position of providing care. So I guess that's kind of where it comes from, in a round about and kind of rumbling way.

Irene Aristizábal:

Trying to think about... There is that side of it where she represents something that is so precious, but at the same time, that distance with what she's saying and the text that she's reading is so set in the opposite of... Or not the opposite, but yeah in contrast with her everyday professional life. But at the same time as viewers, we don't really get to connect with that unless we have a conversation with them, it's interesting.

But I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about the title of the film, which I'm just going to read, I dreamed I called you on the telephone. And we were just mentioning earlier, I was thinking about the grammar of dreamed or dreamt. But it's a title that brings back that sort of distance, but also that parallel universe, and also situates the film very much within an inquiry around time. But you've touched upon it a little bit, but yeah if you could tell us more.

Bryony Gillard:

Yeah definitely. So I dreamed I called you on the telephone is the first line in a poem by Adrienne Rich called For the Dead. I think it dates from 1972, but I might be wrong, don't quote me on that. And yeah, I mean, the full poem is in the film so you can go and here and watch it. So allegedly it's a poem potentially that Adrienne Rich wrote after the suicide of her ex-husband, so that's one kind of potentially scholarly reading of it. But that, for me, that's not necessarily important. The thing that I got from the poem is yeah, exactly what you were saying in terms of starting with I dreamed, places that are already in the past, but also this statement of, I dreamed I called you on the telephone also, yeah, already suggests a kind of a separation. For me it already suggests a kind of a loss, something that has already happened that you're looking back on.

And it's just such an evocative description of lost energy, wasted energy, kind of a conception of time, which, I don't know, feels like it's lasting forever, but also moving way too fast. And it finishes with this kind of description of sitting by a fire and wanting to leave it, but not being able to, and kind of being fascinated with being in this particular present moment of something being in its final burning embers, which is obviously a fantastic

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metaphor for losing someone, being with someone as they are dying and that experience.

But yeah. Yeah, it's a wild piece of writing. And yeah, I was grasping for a title, because titling is always really, really difficult. And I think, yeah, there's just something about that that for me, just that sentence, I just find it still incredibly painful just to think about, because yeah, for anyone who's lost someone, that thing of you still meet them in your dreams and the voice... And also coming back to this thing about sound and hearing someone's voice on the telephone, or having recordings of somebody after they're not in your life and they passed away is such a wild and powerful thing.

And then also, it ties into these incredible voice notes that my amazing friends, D-M and Ella provided to me about their personal experiences of loss which were sent to me on the telephone, which is a nice connection.

Irene Aristizábal:

Well, this is a really good movement to finish. Thank you so much. It's been really fascinating to listen to you and to hear all the ways that you connect the sounds and the process, the intimacy, the vulnerability that is so important in our lives and that we... There is a really warm, caring, holding space in the film that we can feel and that it really, I think, it can connect us to others. There is a sense of community that is shaped within the film that we can connect to, but also taking us so close into ourselves and supporting that moments of loss or of our own personal situations, with our disobedient bodies. So really, really amazing. Congratulations on that beautiful film. And thank you all so much for joining [Audience Claps]