**The Disability And…Podcast Episode 22**

**Disability And…Electric Bodies with Allan Sutherland**

Welcome to the Graeae and Disability Arts Online podcast 'Disability And...' - bringing together thoughtful discussion and debate. This month Colin Hambrook, editor of Disability Arts Online, chats with writer and performance poet, Allan Sutherland, about the launch of 'Electric Bodies' - a collection of poems based on the lives of eight disabled artists. This podcast contains some strong language.

**Colin Hambrook**

Hi. We've been working on the 'Electric Bodies' project over a few years now. It's part of a larger research programme, led by Bath Spa University, called D4D. We've published Allan Sutherland's poetry collection, currently available in print and due to be available in audio soon. 'Electric Bodies' tells the life stories of disabled artists: Mat Fraser, Tony Heaton, Katherine Araniello, Robin Surgeoner, Vici Wreford-Sinnott, Julie McNamara, Jess Thom, and myself. So Allan, it's great to have you.

**Allan Sutherland**

Good to be here.

**Colin Hambrook**

Can you tell us a bit about transcription poetry? Where it came from? How you got the idea for it?

**Allan Sutherland**

It started off just as oral history. For quite a long time I've felt that we as disabled people, as a Disability Arts Movement, we needed to ensure that what we're doing wasn't forgotten. We need to look at ways of preserving our work. And as part of that I was thinking about doing some oral history work. And then I got the news that Paddy Masefield, who's a leading figure - a little bit behind-the-scenes figure, somebody who people who knew about Disability Arts would know that was very important but wasn't a known name like a number of artists are. He was the person who worked with the Arts Council and others to make sure that that work happened and was valued. And then Paddy was told that he got three months to live, and I thought it was really important to try and record Paddy's story. So I went down there and interviewed Paddy. Paddy had some severe M.E. which restricted how we could work together, so I went down and stayed with him and his wife, and then when Paddy felt up to it we'd work together and then other times Paddy would go to bed and I'd other things. So we got that interview done. And then a little while later I read an article in the Oral History Journal, which talked about using poetry as a way of transcribing oral history interviews, so as to get a more accurate indication of how people had been speaking. And that just made me think, 'I wonder if you could use the techniques of poetry with an oral history interview to produce poetry?' And fortunately, I got this (fairly recently completed) transcription of the interview with Paddy and so I thought 'well, let's give it a go with that.' Sold you the idea as I remember.

**Colin Hambrook**

Absolutely.

**Allan Sutherland**

Well, I want to give you credit for that Colin because this whole transcription poetry journey you've been there as a supportive editor from the very beginning, and I really appreciate that. So we took that transcription and I tried editing it into poems and found that actually it worked very well to do that. My background is not really poetry. My background is in scriptwriting. So in creating one of these cycles of poetry, it's kind of like a script - telling the story of somebody's life. So each poem in the cycle is kind of like a scene in a film or a play. One thing that I remember talking to you about at the time that was very interesting (even right at the beginning) was how much the voice of the person being interviewed comes through that process.

**Colin Hambrook**

Very strongly.

**Allan Sutherland**

And I found that even when I do public readings. Still, the individual voice of the person who's being interviewed comes strongly through that process - which is great. That's exactly what I'd want.

**Colin Hambrook**

And in terms of the value of recording life histories in this way - as transcription poetry cycles - what are the strengths of that, do you think?

**Allan Sutherland**

I think the first thing to emphasise about the process is: it produces transcriptions. And that's a key part of what I'm doing each time I do one of these cycles. I'm creating a transcription which will go into a library and be there for researchers to use as a public document, telling one part of the history of our movement. I did an oral history training day some years back. And one of the things that I learned there was: it's really important to do a transcription because researchers haven't got time to listen to loads and loads of tapes, but they can... but you can scan a transcription quite quickly to find out if there's anything relative to the work that you're doing. So you've gotta have the transcription for the work to be useful to researchers and to history. But then turning it into poetry tells the story in a different way. Using poetry as a way of doing that gives it all the strength of (???) emotion and humour and a sort of forcefulness. And, you know, one is able to edit it. In an academic paper I wrote in about 2010, I warned that what I do with this is a good way of producing literature, but it's something that academics, I feel, should be wary of. Because in using the techniques of poetry and editing into a story you're doing something very powerful, which isn't necessarily the same thing that academics want to do. You're telling the story in a very particular way - in what you choose to leave in and leave out. And that's... it's like writing a biography, rather than somebody just telling their own story,

**Colin Hambrook**

I guess for research purposes, a poetry cycle is also (to find the details that you're looking for), that element of it being honed that little bit further aids research.

**Allan Sutherland**

I think so. I think it'll... it certainly sells the material. And in doing a whole lot of these together - as we've done on D4D on 'Electric Bodies' - it's very interesting to see the patterns across on all these different people with quite different backgrounds. And also, in telling all those stories - narrated by people who themselves are important artists, are important. tellers of stories - I was thinking today about how the stuff that comes up... that you wouldn't normally get told in other forms. There's a poem of Mat Fraser's where he talks about how he's having a kind of mid-life crisis and how his partner has said he ought to go for counselling. But he says, 'But the trouble is Allan, I don't trust a non-disabled person to do that.' And I get that. But I think the idea that disabled people don't trust non-disabled people is not one that's been put out there very much.

**Colin Hambrook**

It's not considered important, is it - the trust of a disabled person generally?

**Allan Sutherland**

It doesn't occur to them that we wouldn't be grateful, that we wouldn't trust them for their help. But I think the stories that people have to tell, and the combination of all these different stories, give quite a clear message about why that should be.

**Colin Hambrook**

Are there other lessons that you learned through this process of doing such a (???) of eight subjects in one overall project?

**Allan Sutherland**

Well, it's always interesting hearing the individual details of particular people's lives and the stuff that's happened to them. And because they're such a varied group of people it's quite a different set of experiences that they've had. For example, Katherine Araniello talks about being sent away to a special boarding school when she was very little, and then not being given a mechanised wheelchair until she was 8. So she basically didn't have any mobility, which is quite a shocking thing. And against that you have other people who weren't born disabled but became disabled. So you have Tony Heaton, for example (who's been a really important voice in the Disability Arts Movement), becoming disabled when he had a motorbike accident at the age of about 16. But seeing across the set of poems - seeing people coming from all these different backgrounds, all these different experiences of disability, but really ending up with similar kind of approaches. One reason that I cite for doing this is, we have in the past defined Disability Arts (or I've defined it) as being art made by disabled people about the experience of disability, and what these poems do is they tell us what that experience has been in different ways for quite different people. And that's obviously really informative. And then there's stuff like, I never realised that Punk was so important to Disability Arts. That's a kind of generational thing, I think. After my time Punk, you see. [laughs]

**Colin Hambrook**

I wouldn't say it was a surprise to me, I think because Punk was about embracing otherness...

**Allan Sutherland**

Yeah.

**Colin Hambrook**

...it was a natural fit. You know, you didn't belong in the disco, you didn't belong in the fashionable places, but you could always find a place with the other outcasts within the Punk movement. Another thing, you know, about the whole process that's been so interesting is just how many of us (coming from different... very different experiences) are going through similar processes of grappling with the idea of being a disabled person. And claiming that identity as a positive, as a constructive thing. And having an epiphany.

**Allan Sutherland**

That's one thing that I really hadn't realised before doing that. And I think the word "epiphany" (which is the word that you gave to it) is a good one. It really surprised me to find out how defining yourself as a disabled person is completely different from being disabled or (???). So when Tony Heaton, for example, when he had his motorbike accident, it's like he recognised that he was now a wheelchair user but he didn't take on the identity of 'I'm a disabled person' at that point. It was only subsequently that he started doing that. And there are some very interesting stories about those moments of epiphany.

**Colin Hambrook**

Can you cite one or two of them, perhaps?

**Allan Sutherland**

Well, Mat Fraser talks about when, when he was a crusty and playing in a band and whatever, seeing two girls looking at him at a railway station, and realising that what they were seeing was him as a crusty, not him as a disabled person, and thinking that isn't the identity that I want. So he went back and told his band, 'I'm going off to be a disabled person now', and they said, 'About bloody time too! We've been wondering when you'd get there!' [laughs]

**Colin Hambrook**

There was a similar story in Katherine Araniello's narrative aswell, wasn't there? Although she was much much younger. But she had a series of dreams about being carted off in a van with disabled people, and...

**Allan Sutherland**

Well she describes very graphically a dream that she had when she was about four years old before being taken off to the special school, where she saw disabled people as like a bunch of freaks that she was going to be imprisoned with. For some people in Disability, impairment and the label of "disabled person" has been something that they've lived with from a very early age; but Disability Arts, I think, has been a way that people have found to go to that as something that they see as being something positive in their lives.

**Colin Hambrook**

I think it was... it was real serendipity that you managed to catch Katherine Araniello before she sadly passed away.

**Allan Sutherland**

Yeah.

**Allan Sutherland**

She's such an important artist, I think, of the last 30 years. And it seems a tremendous injustice that she never had - apart from within Disability Art circles - she never had a wider acclaim that she deserved.

**Allan Sutherland**

I think she had some recognition within the Live Art movement, which is where she chose to position herself.

**Colin Hambrook**

It's a great strength of Katherine's work that the Live Art Development Agency recognised her value and importance. And I went to the trouble actually of documenting quite a lot of her work in video and text. That record, I think, is really really important. And I think this research will help to... help lead researchers to her work in a meaningful way.

**Allan Sutherland**

I hope so. I hope so. It's worth remembering that one of the reasons that I thought it was important to do oral history work and set-up an archive and record what we were doing is that, we're not as long-lived as other groups of people. It's easy to think of important figures in our movement who are no longer there. Adam Reynolds, for example, would be someone that I'm sure would've been really interesting to do a set of poems with.

**Colin Hambrook**

When you were putting together the (???) for 'Electric Bodies', I wondered how you went about choosing who you would interview.

**Allan Sutherland**

First thing was, I wanted it to be all established artists. People who'd made some sort of significant contribution to Disability Arts. And then on the whole I wanted it to be people whose work I knew, just because it was easier for me to work out what was there, what needed to be said, what needed to be explored. But then doing a group... trying to to get a reasonable sort of spread of people... I'm sorry, we didn't find anybody learning-disabled to include. That's the one big big gap that I'd point to.

**Colin Hambrook**

Maybe there are future opportunities to do more?

**Allan Sutherland**

Let's hope. Yeah,

**Colin Hambrook**

I think one of the things that the 'Electric Bodies' cycles do is to record a certain time in history. There's a sort of sociological research there, I think, in terms of the brutality of the 70s and 80s and how disabled people were treated and regarded then.

**Allan Sutherland**

I think there are things that if you told the average Guardian reader that these things happened in the 1930s, they'd say 'Yes, that was a terrible time, wasn't it? We were very unenlightened in those days.' But tell them that it happened within our lifetime - that's quite shocking. There is a kind of link between quite different experiences that people have had, but they come from the same sort of mindset. Between things like Katherine not being able to move because they wouldn't give her an electric wheelchair until she was 10 or something, and Robin Surgeoner talking about having all these pointless operations to make him... to break his legs and stretch them and whatever so he would walk a little bit more normally.

**Colin Hambrook**

Similar with Mat Fraser isn't it? With all of the devices that they were trying to give him arm extensions and...

**Allan Sutherland**

Yeah, I can remember because I'm just old enough to remember the thalidomide thing when it first started breaking. And there were lots and lots of stories about all these prosthetics that were being developed (which practically nobody used actually). And the reason for that was very straightforward. There's a thing you can find online where Mat does a striptease wearing prosthetic arms, and one of the things he takes off is the two prosthetic arms. And actually, you can see there that he's not able to undo the buttons on his shirt until he's got rid of the fucking prosthetics!

**Colin Hambrook**

[Laughs]

**Allan Sutherland**

They're not just unhelpful, they're actually a hindrance! But I'm glad we got all that stuff from Mat because the Thalidomiders will be gone in a few decades; it'll be a thing that happened in the 20th century that will be kind of forgotten about. Because there was only quite a short period where it was being given to pregnant women, and so they're like a group of people who were all in the same class at school. They've gone through the same things at the same time as each-other and now they're moving into old age and dying. And it won't be long till the whole lot of them are gone. And I think they deserve to be something a bit better than a historical sideline (???)

**Colin Hambrook**

Absolutely. What other useful things for the future generations do you think 'Electric Bodies' reveals?

**Allan Sutherland**

Lots! For example, I'm really pleased that we got Jess Thom's account of her life as somebody with Tourette's. I mean, Jess has in our own shows has done a very good job of describing all of that, but there was some very interesting aspects to what she was saying about her schooling and how teachers dealt with her. And how she's come to look back and see how she'd be given things to do, which were actually sort of containing the fact that she'd go wandering around if they didn't give her something to go and do. She obviously had quite sympathetic teachers. Plus her account of doing Beckett's 'Not I', which I think was an incredible thing to do, to actually negotiate with the with the Beckett Estate, and put a whole new meaning on a key piece of work by one of the leading writers of the 20th century. All the stuff I've done in the past has been from a Disability Arts perspective. It was quite interesting interviewing Robin Surgeoner - who's a gold medal winning Paralympian - bringing a sports angle to it, which is something I've not looked at before. He had a very interesting story to tell about how he got into swimming, basically, by being given hydrotherapy and sort of took it from there. Putting it all beside each-other, it's great to show that there are lots of different stories to tell; plenty of parallels between them. But it's not like, 'Oh, this is what it's like to be a disabled person and they're all the same'. It's a whole set of very different stories.

**Colin Hambrook**

I think Vici Wreford-Sinnott comes very much from a regional perspective. A story about Ireland and a story about the Northeast.

**Allan Sutherland**

Yeah, I think that's excellent. And also bringing in some stuff from a farming background. There's a really interesting story (I don't know if we put it in the book, but certainly in the longer cycle), there's a poem based on when her father had a stroke she went with him to buy a new tractor and saw how he was being treated, in a way that he wouldn't have been treated six months earlier because he wasn't disabled then. That's a story I haven't heard before. And I think Vici is a really important person in her own right, so it's really good to hear her story and to get some recognition that Disability Arts did exist outside London.

**Colin Hambrook**

The North and Newcastle were absolutely pivotal to the development of Disability Arts in the early 1990s...

**Allan Sutherland**

Right.

**Colin Hambrook**

...and it seems a terrible waste, it's a shame that that significance isn't documented more.

**Allan Sutherland**

Yeah.

**Colin Hambrook**

The work of the National Disability Arts Forum and the Northern Disability Arts Forum aren't kind of recorded, and I think that section with Vici does that to some extent.

**Allan Sutherland**

Yeah. It would be good to see some sort of local project developing to do that on a local level.

**Colin Hambrook**

In a more general respect though, the 'Electric Bodies' book, I think it... we've talked about the value of it to researchers, to academics, and from a historical and sociological perspective, but I think it has wider appeal as a set of of biographies.

**Allan Sutherland**

I've long had a concern for the potential disabled artists of the future. That, have we left enough behind that they will know they're not the first? Doesn't necessarily mean that they have to copy us, but even if people are just disagreeing with us and say 'God, I'm not going to turn out rubbish like Colin Hambrook, that old stuff! [laughs]

**Colin Hambrook**

[laughs]

**Allan Sutherland**

But something to place themselves, something to give them the idea that what they're doing it's not ridiculous to think of achieving things - being an artist. And to have some realisation of how other people have tackled that, and what sort of messages they've left. So I think this book is potentially part of that process.

**Colin Hambrook**

I think it explains quite a lot of the barriers.

**Allan Sutherland**

Yes.

**Colin Hambrook**

I suspect that for disabled people of future generations, the barriers will shift and change. And there's a certain amount of unpredictability in how barriers will change.

Yes.

**Colin Hambrook**

But ways of addressing barriers and ways of... I don't want to say 'overcoming', but ways of taking those barriers down will... there will always be similar approaches that will be important, just in terms of coming together collectively...

**Allan Sutherland**

Yeah.

**Colin Hambrook**

...and of finding and talking about our experience.

**Allan Sutherland**

And I would hope we can teach people in the future the importance of recognising when there are barriers, and overcoming them or disregarding them or just dealing with them. It's like one thing that our generation has that was: a lot of the barriers were very obvious so it was easy to see what needed to be done. That the buses needed to be accessible, that people needed to be able to get into schools and drama schools, and whatever, I think these days people face... there are still barriers but they're not quite so overt, not quite so easy to see. And young people saying, 'I'm not a disabled artist, I'm just an artist' may have the cards more stacked against them than they're aware.

**Colin Hambrook**

It might be interesting to take younger disabled artists through this process and find out what differences are, where changes happen. I mean, it was quite interesting with this (???) of eight that everyone came from a very different background in terms of impairment and geographically and socially, but there were huge similar similarities.

**Allan Sutherland**

I think some of the things, you only kind of realise over time. I spent a lot of time trying to write for television and only gradually realising how powerful the gatekeepers were, and how negative their attitudes were, and how difficult it would be to do the sort of thing that I wanted to. I mean, I had commissions from Channel Four several times, and each-time I did... A thing that I always really wanted to write about was how disabled people get fucked up by their parents; by their parents and teachers and non-disabled people. And commissioning editors really didn't want to hear about that. Whereas I always wanted to find ways of pointing the finger, a bit. [laughs] I mean, it's quite interesting to see throughout all the eight things, you've got a bunch of people who have fairly similar outlooks on the world, who don't feel they've got to tug their forelocks all the time, who have a quite clear sense of what's right and wrong about what happened to disabled people.

**Colin Hambrook**

And it's quite compelling as a read.

**Allan Sutherland**

Yeah. And it's good to see the pictures illustrated aswell, to see the poems illustrated. I think your pictures in the book really contribute a lot.

**Colin Hambrook**

I hope they're interesting anyway. Even if they don't get the humour, that they find them intereresting.

**Allan Sutherland**

I hope so. And I hope the little selections of poems in the book will take some people to reading the the full cycles.

**Colin Hambrook**

Well thanks very much, Allan. It's been great to chat. It's great to have the book. And hopefully we can we can guide people to the D4D website a bit more readily now aswell, where they can see the full cycles.

**Allan Sutherland**

I hope so. And the pictures are on the website, aren't they?

**Colin Hambrook**

The animations are on the website, yeah.

**Allan Sutherland**

The animations using the poems, yeah. Great. Thank you very much. I really enjoyed it.

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