**The Disability And…Podcast Episode 28**

**Disability and…Neurodiversity with Mike Faulkner**

**Ian Rattray**

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 climate activist and artist Mike Faulkner about neurodiversity. This podcast contains strong language.

**Colin Hambrook**

Hello, and welcome to the Disability and... podcast. My name is Colin Hambrook, and I have the pleasure to have interviewed Mike Faulkner. Mike is the founder of D-Fuse, a multimedia arts organisation which has evolved to address social and environmental themes. Mike started out as a graphic designer, and in the early 1990s, formed D-Fuse, an audio visual collective who were seen as early pioneers of the VJ scene. His work has been shown internationally, including at Ars Electronica in Linz, Mori Art Centre in Tokyo, and the Tribeca Film Festival in New York. He was invited as a visual artist to collaborate for a world tour with the musician Beck and has also performed with Scanner, Steve Rife and the LSO. In recent years, much of D-Fuse's practice has focused on environmental issues, creating a series of films for Live Earth, still used by Al Gore today. Through his residency at I-Beam in New York, he created 'Small Global' an interactive video installation about global interdependence, consumption and its environmental costs. In the podcast, Mike talks about his education, work years and becoming an artist. Addressing how he came to embrace his lived experience of dyslexia and ADHD which has evolved to address social and environmental themes. Mike talks about his education work years, and becoming an artist addressing how he came to embrace his lived experience of dyslexia and ADHD.

**Mike Faulkner**

I think it's important to go back to the beginning and almost see where I was, like at school, you know, I was either really good at subjects or really bad. Even the subjects I was good at, I got really bad at. I wasn't top in English, but I was in the top class and then I'd be demoted, like by reading aloud, you know. I can't read very well, aloud especially, and I was dropped to the bottom class. I remember my mother said "I just don't get it, you know, you're top of your class and now you're at the bottom. What's happened?" You know, I don't think I had any trust in the system. I don't think I worked in that system. I don't think I functioned in that system. So I built my own opportunities and looking back now, some things are actually really... happened in my life which are really good, but at the time I just saw them as a sort of natural progression, like my parents were divorced when I was young and I know my mother really wanted me to go to college. One of the reasons was she wanted maintenance from my father, so it was like I was going to college, full stop. Really my choices were woodwork or art, you know? So I remember going and I didn't really care about it to be honest, because I just knew I had no choice. It's not like I didn't want to go. Yeah, so I went to college, I did an A level foundation. I remember I got a 'D' at college for my course and I thought that was really bad. And I went into the college, and only two other people got an 'E' or something and the rest had failed. So, it transformed from me thinking I got a terrible grade to actually being the only person (I don't think 'D's great, but it better than nothing!) So it was one of those scenarios and then I started this stupid course, which they decided to cancel within about six weeks, eight weeks. I just thought "Well, that's a waste of time!" and I just ended up playing badminton with all these people. So I sort of left that course, partly because my mum knew somebody who worked in the studio which did the Argos catalogue, and I went on to work there. They gave me so many skills actually, there was photography, there was art work, it was just like every single skill in terms of graphic design I learnt. They sent me to college one day a week and that was great education. I was really keen to go to college because my sister was at university and I just thought "Yeah, I want to go and I want to escape from my small town."

**Colin Hambrook**

Mike then went on to talk about his early work experiences in England and the U.S. and how travel opened up the world with new perceptions.

**Mike Faulkner**

Oh, yeah sort of joking around about it. I just remember applying for different jobs. I remember applying to do the design packaging at Loctite Glue factory, the glue company and I just remember thinking this must be the most boring job in the world and I'm actually trying to get this job! I probably didn't come across as a very good candidate in hindsight, but I think sometimes I look back, and I see my daughter and I see opportunities and see the things and yes, it's different now. But there's still that bleakness ahead of them in a way where they're just underpaid, undervalued. I've probably had more opportunities than probably my daughter has in a way. It's hard at that time of life isn't it? To know what your life is? You're always constantly told this is what you're going to do and this is how you're going to live your life, and get a pension do that and do this. I mean, I did the total opposite. I just basically went and worked on a Summer camp. A friend of mine who had been at university, had gone on to a Summer camp and told me how brilliant it was. Like, you just hang out with us, do sport, just hang out in the mountains, you just have a hut. You just teach a few kids here and there, and then you just have a great time. Actually, he told me afterwards it was the same, but I had this vision of this wilderness and this amazing thing, but instead it was like a refugee camp really. There was like 600 students and 250 counsellors and they were all English, most of them. I'd never been abroad, well I'd been to Paris, on a trip with some friends on a boat. And then, this is first time I've been on a plane. I suddenly went into Connecticut, I was in the Summer camp. I looked on the map where all the other kids lived, and some of them lived in California, and I just drove over, you can do these driveways. So I drove to California, drove around, trailways bus, and it was quite a revelation for me really. I met other people who were then travelling onto Australia, I just suddenly realised the world was a lot bigger than... it just suddenly grew exponentially from there. I could see this world was this massive place. It totally transformed me.

**Colin Hambrook**

Our conversation then turned to Mike's studies at university for a Master's degree, when he finally came to grips with the dyslexia diagnosis.

**Mike Faulkner**

10 years ago Sarah said to me -my partner- she said you should do a Master's. Because I had that craving to be in that sort of world; lots of my friends were professors or lecturers and I was actually teaching at Camberwell as well. And I thought, well, it's probably a good idea that I get some sort of qualification other than A Levels. They used my book actually, as a way of not as an undergraduate, to bypass that. And I thought it was going to be really easy, actually. I think that's that Dunning Kruger effect, where you believe the less you know the more confident you are, and the more you know, the less confident you get. I did tick the box that said dyslexia and they said it's going to take about six weeks to process and you have to be assessed, and I thought, well fine. But then I went into this class and I just thought... it was just reading these academic papers. The course was an MRes and it was Information Environments. I mean, it was the greatest course ever, I have to say, it was amazing, but it was a total... it totally blew... I opted to drop out almost immediately because I just couldn't read the papers. I just couldn't understand the language. I did the dyslexic assessment and it was one of these classes that I just didn't understand and I talked to the assessor and she said... she just gave me this thing, she said you've just got to ask questions. If you don't know, you just ask. Everyone else is writing stuff down and I said "I didn't understand that. Could you explain it?" And he sort of starts to explain something else. I said "I don't understand that either." And then he was almost a bit like "Oh, come on!" you know? And then he asked "Who else understands? Come on, someone tell him!" and it just turned out in the whole class, - no one understood it. They were too scared to ask and I was thinking it just revealed where that point is where people don't ask questions because they just don't want to be appear stupid. I mean, I guess that's the only thing that's I'd say which I find quite good about now, is like I can say "I'm Neurodivergent, I don't understand that." So I have an excuse to say that instead of feeling stupid or feeling like I should know. It's like now I know, I don't have to know, I can ask. I think that lesson applies to everybody though, you should be able to ask questions really. If you don't get it, you shouldn't pretend you know. But we are in a society where everybody pretends to know everything and you're judged on this. Yeah again, the Dunning Kruger effect is the thing I think sort of reveals it all really. It's like the people that are most confident generally know the least I think.

**Colin Hambrook**

Neurodivergence manifests in lots of different ways, depending on the individual. The discussion moved on to talking about specifics of what it means to have a fast brain, comparing it to driving a car at top speed, but in reverse.

**Mike Faulkner**

So in a way, that's really how you can apply that to Neurodivergency, where you need people with alternative points of view. You know, because I'm thinking slightly different to you, it's like I'm coming up with different results. They're not always good and they often they're bad, but sometimes, they'll be really good. You know, they'll be totally like, how did I miss that? sort of thing. I think the other thing is how my brain works; it runs really fast, like even now I'm thinking further down here what we're going to talk about and I want to spit those things out and then I get bored quickly, and I move on. I always think about how fast... my brain moves fast, I know that, like visually. So when I got tested for my dyslexia, I had super high IQ but it is like I couldn't even read my own report. I didn't understand the report. But basically, visually, I'm off the spectrum. I can do... I remember always impressing my daughter when she was at nursery, no -Primary School when she's about five or six. I could do 'Where's Wally?' in literally five seconds. Literally, you could pull a page... and I did them for about six or seven pages in a row. Most of it was luck, I have to say, but I don't look at a page, I scan and I can pull quotes out of books really well, but not read the book. It's sort of like I can see shapes and patterns, and I can totally just pull them apart and find things. All my friends, now if I look back in terms of the past, there's Neurodivergency around, -they're quirky, they're off, you know, they're oddball in a way. I'm always wondering in the past, I think now I know why I hang out with them, because we're on the same wavelength. Even Stuart Krogs, he's talking about some stuff and now he's... because I think in a way, people will start to readdress stuff. Like he's always losing things you know, and I always thought, I couldn't understand why he couldn't get things organised when he had all the skills, and I didn't. He had the knowledge, he had the education but why wasn't it working for him? I knew how things worked because I was sort of always doing things just by default or through my path of... because I think that's the thing, you have this system, and you make it work and if you don't know the system, we can't make it. I feel like I'm driving up the road on the motorway, I'm going to say at 80 because everyone does drive at 80 when I do go on a motorway. But basically, I'm actually driving but I'm driving a Ferrari but I'm driving it in reverse. And that's a very complicated thing to appear normal but totally wrong in every aspect. And people go well, your Ferrari can go 120 miles an hour, can't you? Yeah, but not in reverse! You know, it's hard enough just keeping up with everybody else. So it is a hare and the tortoise in a way isn't it? Like you speed ahead and then you fall... it's not falling asleep, it's more just falling or spiralling out into a direction that just doesn't work. I often obsess on things and nothing comes of it. I've got lots of projects that I need to start or do. And everything's moving forward slowly but Covid's been hard, lots of things have been pushed back or done. So I feel quite frustrated because I've done quite a lot of work over the past four years and none of it has seen the light of day. So it has an effect on me really.

**Colin Hambrook**

In talking about neurodiversity, ideas of how society needs grit came to the fore, and how technology has changed our need for different ways of engaging.

**Mike Faulkner**

For me, they're all joined together because I think the thing about computers, pre computers, the idea to draw something straight and perfect was really difficult, -you'd have to manually do these things, you'd never get a straight line. But now the default is a straight line. So people would purposely bring in glitch or things just to make it interesting, and I think that sort of relates to society: when it's perfect, is actually quite boring. And it's like if the world is perfect, you end with places like Singapore. You've almost got that happening in China, where somewhere like Shanghai is like just clean, super clean on the surface that is, and then it's everything's pushed out. It's happening to London now as well, it's where you have this sort of cleanliness to it, where everyone thinks it's great. And if you look at it, it's quite hollow, and it's quite lacking any grit.

**Colin Hambrook**

Our conversation moved on to talking about climate change. I went on to ask Mike, about his thoughts on Greta Thunberg, the climate change activist.

**Mike Faulkner**

I think it's also because I was watching those documentaries and the film and and my takeaway from it is I could see, push climate change aside, I could see her frustrations and her vision is... okay, the subjects climate change, but it's like her frustration how other people just don't get it. I think this is because there's lots of it's down to our conditioning and really it's about seeing things differently. We have the information, and that's really all she's saying. Look, the informations there, read it, understand it and we have to do something about it really quickly. I mean, luckily she had the sort of parents who are pretty connected and stuff. How many other Gretas are out there that didn't get the exposure? So, I mean people were sort of slating them off going, 'Oh, yeah, it's alright for you if you've got that'. But actually, thank god, she's got some savvy parents.

**Colin Hambrook**

Mike went on to talk about his thoughts on the economy, climate change and consumerism.

**Mike Faulkner**

I mean, I think that ties into the whole climate change thing, because we're told GDP is our measurement of growth in the healthy economy, when that actually is the most destructive. Like, if you have an oil rig spill and you clean it up, your GDP goes up, but if you actually give people a pay rise, the GDP goes down. Just by spending money it pushes the GDP up, but if you actually spend it on proper things it goes down, you know, that's not really factoring in the planet and its resources.

**Colin Hambrook**

A few other writers have been key to Mike's work about climate change. George Marshall is one of many thinkers who have influenced him. Key is the difficulty in fully grasping some of the concepts that underlie what's happening and really understanding the impact of consumerism.

**Mike Faulkner**

George Marshall, he's done a book called 'Don't Even Think About It: Why Our Brains Are Wired To Ignore Climate Change'. Basically, he talks about this thing where we don't like the idea that we're the bad people. Nobody intentionally causes climate change, but our whole system is geared to this destruction. Basically people feel that they're doing these things, like they're going on holiday because they've been working hard or something, or driving the kids to school. They don't really realise these actions are actually causing it and there's no one there to tell us they're causing this, even though there is the news, knowing it does. There's no government infrastructure and this is really because where we're geared towards consumption in our economic growth is about basically infinite growth on a finite planet. And that we're realising is we're reaching that the end of the road very quickly. We're in a pandemic, you know, so the whole idea that this is even slightly normal is just totally surreal. And the idea that we might have... that there's a strong possibility for having another pandemic in the next 10 years is extremely likely. And it's just like we're not out of this one yet, and we're never really going to be out of this. It's going to drift along and sort of graduate away but whether they come back with vengeance, we just don't know. It's like the idea that we have to pretend everything's normal and carry on instead of saying "What the fuck?!" You know? The system has to change. I mean, the least that's happening in America there isn't a reverse of direction. We're just carrying on with this carbon neutral, bollocks really. It's just this sort of leaving everything till later. I thought about this, it's I think, partly because people think it's 100 years away, because the measurements are made in 100 years, they think 100 years is when it's is the problem, but actually we might reach 1.5 degrees by in the next 10 years. And that means it's the end of coral reefs now, that means they're gone. So somewhere like Australia should be promoting a Barrier Reef 'Come now before closing down sale' It's what they should be saying: come to the reef now, before it's all gone. But they don't want to. Partly even I don't believe it, sometimes I just forget. It's sort of like, the subplot, if this is a film, it's the classic film where everyone in it was carrying as normal when the world's falling apart. Can people cope with it in a way? I think this 1, 1.5, 2 degrees thing is really hard to comprehend. I still don't really get that 4 degrees minus is actually an ice age. It doesn't compute really because 1 degree, it's not much when you go outside, because it's an average global. You know I still don't really grasp that one to be honest and I don't think many other people do either. Otherwise, if we said it was 50 degrees or something, people would then get bit scared, or be saying 'But everything was 1.5 degrees, if we pass that is the end of the world, and now oh, it's 2 degrees now, and now you're going to possibly entertain three.' Already we know theres a 5% chance of halting at 1.5 degrees. Apparently if we stop everything, like just cease to function like lockdown or something, it would bring our odds up to 26%. So we've got 74% chance of reaching 1.5 degrees very, very soon. So our odds? Yeah, it's pretty you know... I'm sure it's like government's... Well, its the powers, I mean, how do we get Brexit? How do we get with these things? You know, how do we get Trump? You know, it's like it's quirky... control. Getting back to the consumption thing, everyone sees climate change as the problem and, you know, people talking about buying electric cars, and buying our way out to fix it. I mean really we should be looking at consumption as the problem and climate changes as the outcome. Because for example, if you said all the oceans could be a perfect a carbon sink and could soak up all the carbon, would we still carry on with deforestation? Where we still carry on destroying the planet? We would, because there will be nothing to stop us, for even now someone's there to stop us but we're not actually doing anything about it. We're sort of pretending, we're sort of twiddling around saying,' Oh yeah, carbon zero, carbon neutral.' When I saw outside a fast food restaurant that was sort of slightly posh, they've got carbon neutral hamburger, and then I looked a bit closer... it's basically about offsetting, that basically assess lots of this new stuff based on future feed, on future inventions to sequester carbon and stuff and it's unproven and it's also expensive. You know, really simple, quick ways that are just, as Greta says, it's a simple problem: you just stop fossil fuels. The other one as well for me, is animal agriculture because that's the other driver as well. But Carbon neutral means that while some emissions are still being generated by a building process, these emissions are offset somewhere else, making the overall net emissions zero. Whilst carbon zero means that no carbon emissions are being produced from a product service, e.g. carbon zero electricity can be provided by 100% renewable energy supply. It's wrong to tell people these things because they believe it, you know, -we're going to build laser roads, we're going to build a third runway and we're going to be carbon neutral. And the NEA reason that we aren't carbon neutral is because we ship everything overseas, like, the plane that takes off doesn't count. Because is it the country that lands from, it takes off from as a country and lands? Is it the people in the planes responsibility? Is it the pilot? Is it the airline? They just basically push that sciences doesn't count, it doesn't count in the country. So you can easily fiddle the figures and you're still going to be in the same position.

**Colin Hambrook**

Next, I asked Mike, about what role art can play in getting the message across about climate change, and the possibility of changing how society functions.

**Mike Faulkner**

The trouble with art for me is I'm still learning what art is. And I'm still very judgmental on lots of art, because I see lots of art and just think it's crap, and other art, I sort of revisit and see. Working with people who are artists, they sort of helped me through that process, but I think art is a really brilliant vehicle to get messaging across. I mean, I thought before it was a case of just highlighting information, you just tell people about these things and then they respond to it. But I realise now with the whole fake news thing and confirmation bias, that people just decide to change the narrative to suit themselves. But I think the overarching narrative is that people realise that people think it's bad, but it's going to be alright, you know, we're going to get there in the end. There is a lot of people... I don't know, that thing that always gets me is doing the right thing. It's like, I'm not 100% sure what the right thing is, climate scientists don't 100% know, why would you assume you know what that is? It's like because you're believing in the system again, and I think it's like, for me, I don't believe in a system, I believe the system's corrupt. You know, it's like everything is stem. Again, back to the consumption thing is like, now we're talking about climate justice, you know, but again, this is reevaluating our existence on the planet. It's like the Spanish, the British, you know we didn't help countries, we didn't liberate them, we destroyed them and we stole from them and that's coming to light now. It's a pretty sort of horrible thing to find out, it's almost like finding out your grandfather was a Nazi or something, -t's just doesn't rest very well in terms of your belief. Adam Curtis talks about this a lot in Bitter Lake actually about this idea of good and evil where there isn't good and bad people. There is no evil, you're never fighting evil, you're actually just fighting for your country. And that's actually something else that the guy who's written 'Sapiens' he basically refers to the fact that there's only 120 people you can sort of relate to once you go beyond 120 people, you're not going to fight for them or do anything. But the way you get past that is, in the history we've done this in the past, is you have religion and then you have land, countries. People will fight for their country, but they won't fight for the 130th person they don't know. Also the other one is corporations, it says by having corporations we believe in this non existent thing. I think it takes the Peugeot as an example, it says if you blow up, if you destroy all the cars, you still believe in the brand. It's something that doesn't really exist, but you unite people together and basically this idea of good and evil. So how we can unite the world and stuff is is going... Well, things do change. I mean, that's the optimism side of it really. I did this climate lab in Liverpool with an organisation called Metal and it was really enlightening. It was great, actually, but it was a little bit sombre, we felt that there was no answers. That was almost about a month before Extinction Rebellion and for me, that was true transformation. It's like how you could totally change people's perceptions and even people who were cynical about it, a few weeks in they were actually saying this is quite amazing really. There is those shots of growth, of optimism around I think. There's another guy, a book I've just read or listened to on Audible is Rutger Bregman and his book is called Humankind. It's changing the perception of how mankind... because we're always told that underneath we're all evil, but on the top we pretend to be good. And given certain different circumstances, say like, Lord of the Flies, that we all turn evil. But he's rewritten history by examining it and seeing that actually when that does happen, people actually turn out to be quite nice. It is dominated by old, privileged, white males dictating these stories. But it's often saying that basically... his whole thing is that we are all nice people deep down, but it's like, we get distorted with control and consumption of money. It's like, I mean, just this idea of billionaires... you look at that the idea that Bill Gates can get people to give up 98% of their wealth and they still can live beyond their means. It's like, if you cannot spend 2% of your earnings, and it doesn't matter what you buy -a boat, plane, whatever, -what is the point of having that money? It just doesn't exist. That money comes from somebody else. It's not equal in any way and that whole idea of earning lots of money and doing this, building up this... I'd be interested to know what drives them in a way to do that? Wouldn't you just say once you got... if you're the Amazon guy, you go why don't we just put this into shares and just share it between the employees? What have you got to gain really? You've got nothing, have you? It's not like you can spend it. It's just control and believing you're superior.

**Colin Hambrook**

And finally, Mike let us into how his ADHD affects his process when producing digital art, like the Nine Earths project.

**Mike Faulkner**

I've got Kathy now to help me and stuff. And I think we sort of... it worked really well with Kathy, but when we got a produce in, and the producer thought all they had to do was make me cover my... you know, make sure I send things and do things and do that. But that isn't what I need. I need security and the worst thing I need is somebody to say "Oh, I must do that thing. I'll do that soon. I'll do that soon." I need someone say "I'll do that by Tuesday, it's done" Or not do it, because otherwise I'll do it. Do you know I mean? It's like, I have to know things are done otherwise, I start thinking about them and it's the noise. It's the noise in my head is like constantly nagging and I have these lists, and I've got hundreds of lists and got things to do. I mean, everybody has things to do, domestic things and stuff like that. I have to clear my head of stuff. So at the moment, I'm working on Nine Earths and it's great and in a way, it's like I got this booked in and now this is finished, I can move back into Nine Earths, and I'm full of excitement to do it, but I know the second I start, it might just slow down and sort of get lost in a... because I want instant gratification as well, and I think you know, some of the process for the design process of the screen is really time consuming and takes like days to do and then you look at and go "Okay, well that's not gonna work." And then you sort of move on, but I can visualise really good, but it's like visualising, beyond like the stars, it's almost like visualising the stars, but they're on the other side of the planet and what you can see and I know roughly what they look like, but I need to actually see it to double check. Most people can't even see the stars, you know, but I want to dial into some of those details and it frustrates me immensely.

**Colin Hambrook**

This brings us to the end of this month's podcast. Please note, this recording with Mike Faulkner was made before the critical IPCC report was published, and we now could hit 1.5 degrees within the next four years, as reported on the BBC News as Code Red. I'd like to thank Mike Faulkner for his time. Go to D-Fuse.com to find out more about Mike's latest project Nine Earths, a film, an installation and series of talks which has been commissioned for COP26, the United Nations Climate Change Conference June and November 2021. Nine Earth's is a digital artwork that explores the relationship between everyday events and humanity's self destructive and excessive demand for environmental resources. This is Colin Hambrook saying farewell till next time.

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