Disability and…the art of Connection with Letty McHugh

**Ian Rattray**

Welcome to the Graeae and Disability Arts Online podcast: Disability and... Bringing together thoughtful discussion and debate. This month, founding Editor of Disability Arts Online, Colin Hambrook, chats with artist and writer Letty McHugh, who is currently an associate artist with Disability Arts Online. Letty talks about her Disability Arts Online project the Book of Hours, and her thinking around art as a way of creating meaningful connections.

**Colin Hambrook**

Hi, I'm Colin Hambrook, Editor of Disability Arts Online. And I'm really pleased to be talking to Letty McHugh, who's one of Disability Arts Online associate artists. And Letty, I think you took up your associateship with us at the beginning of 2020?

**Letty McHugh**

I think it was March 2020. Just as the world fell apart.

**Colin Hambrook**

Did you want to introduce yourself and say a bit about your practice?

**Letty McHugh**

Sure. So I'm Letty. I'm an artist and writer based in Howarth, West Yorkshire. My practice is about using art to find connection, and exploring questions of value and which stories that we should be valuing.

**Colin Hambrook**

And the project that you've been working on with Disability Arts Online, is called the Book of Hours, which is a reference, of course, to the mediaeval books of hours. Can you say a bit about where your interest in the area of art history came from?

**Letty McHugh**

The original idea for the project Book of Hours came about in April of 2020, when I had an MS relapse and had a really severe bout of photophobia. So I was sort of alone in a darkened room for two or three weeks. And in that time, had the thought "I wish I had a book of hours." The way that I understood what a book of hours was at the time, was a sort of guidebook that told you what to think about for every hour of the day. From the little bit that I knew about them before, probably partially comes from my Catholic upbringing; you know a book of hours is still a thing in the church. But I was particularly interested... I've always been interested in mediaeval history, just sort of enthusiastic amateur. And the image of those beautiful mediaeval books with the really rich, illuminated pages, it was really sort of focusing on that image that got me through a particularly difficult afternoon. Because I didn't really want like a prayer book, I didn't want to you know, think about how to dedicate my suffering to God. So it was sort of laid in that room thinking about, well, if I was going to make a book of hours that was more appropriate to me, as a sort of queer disabled woman in the 21st century, what would it have in it? And I sort of imagined it, and kind of filled it with images that were helpful to me on that afternoon. So thinking about like, the lavender in my front yard, and sort of the peace I feel when I smell it and my family. And then when I recovered, I sort of came out of it with this idea that felt like such an important thing. And it felt like this is what I want to make; it's something that can bring connection and solace to people who are experiencing that moment of isolation. I think I wanted to make art for me, what religion was for a First Century monk, that kind of thing that I could dedicate myself to. Yeah, that's where the idea first came from.

**Colin Hambrook**

I was very moved in one of your previous projects, Seaworthy Vessel, that was how you use the simple process of creating an origami boat, as a way of helping people to value and honour themselves and the memories of other people. And I kind of the sense of value of your approach to questions about value was really, really apparent through that kind of deep sense of resonance there. In one of our previous conversations, you mentioned a quote from Agnes Martin: "My paintings are not about what they seem, but about how they make you feel." How do those kinds of ideas resonate with the Book of Hours?

**Letty McHugh**

I have a collection of quotes that are about... kind of encapsulate what I feel is my own approach to art making, which is that it's not really about the thing you're looking at, it's about the connection, it creates an exchange of ideas, but that's what the actual art is. So I came across that quote by Agnes Martin and added it to my note book of pertinent quotes. Because I do think that that is the important thing when we make art. It's the exchange of feelings, and the fact that you can communicate without using words and sort of across, you know, across time, across generations, if you're encountering a painting you can be communicating with somebody that's been done for 500 years. And that's what I really love about art. That's the sort of approach that's inherent to my practice and kind of spans my projects its that... always the search for connection and the desire to create value and to share stories. And then Agnes Martin as a person, became extra relevant to my Book of Hours project as I decided to do a bit of research about her. Because I'm always worried about quoting somebody when you don't know who they were. I was worried that I might find out you know, that she was a fascist or something. So, as I started researching her, she lived this really fascinating life. She had a successful career in New York, and disappeared from New York into the New Mexican desert. And literally built herself a wooden hut with a chainsaw and lived a life of isolation and started making art. It just felt like such... one of the parallels that I was looking for, of this link between people who sought out isolation. Like in the early Christian period, I'd started looking at through books of hours, started looking at figures like Saint Cuthbert, who isolated himself on Lindisfarne. I think partially because that's something I have a fantasy of doing. This idea of like, making in a hut on a beach somewhere, and then that's what Agnes Martin, you know, that's what she did. But obviously, like all these things, her true life was a lot more complicated. And we can kind of idealise that. But she was somebody who struggled with mental illness and she was somebody who suffered a lot through the choices. So you know, it is a hard thing to do. And that kind of was one of the important things that started me questioning, which I think one of the major themes of Book of Hours, which is of how can we kind of honour the suffering? Suffering is one of the universal things of human experience. How can we kind of, make space for that in art and in our lives to sort of recover from that suffering? But without doing that thing, that I think a lot of people do throughout history of creating suffering for ourselves, because we think it's gonna make us better artists or better people.

**Colin Hambrook**

Did you get a sense in your research around Agnes Martin, of what took her to that point, and why she made that choice?

I mean, I'm not an expert, but I believe from what I read, that she was perhaps schizophrenic. She heard voices, which again, is a thing that you can really relate to those early people, you know, early Christian people who heard voices that they attributed to God or to saints. She heard voices telling her like to restrict her diet and telling her to isolate herself. And it's one of those quite interesting things of, if those Christian people were here today, a lot of them probably would have diagnosable mental illnesses whether that's schizophrenia or OCD. My thinking was like, I romanticised that when I first read about it. I romanticised that idea of isolating yourself, but then when you actually look into it, I think it's quite an unhealthy thing to romanticise.

**Colin Hambrook**

Yeah, yeah. I have a lot of kind of strong feelings about the whole kind of romanticisation of mental illness and how the non-disabled world kind of uses those tropes as a way of kind of idealising certain aspects of human consciousness. And, yeah, I think it can be very, very unhelpful, to say the least. But as part of your research more recently, you went to Lindisfarne didn't you? And kind of explored that idea a bit more closely. How was that?

I took myself off to the Northumbrian coast. And I think the idea was essentially, to call myself out on the idea that if I did live a life where I was next to the sea, and wrote at set times of the day, and all that kind of thing, that A: that I would be happy (or not necessarily even happy but calm and dedicated to my art) and B: that I would be very productive. So I went and I sort of tried to write eight times a day, at what would have been prayer times. And of course, when I got there, I didn't do those things. And I didn't live a simple life. I did still put off writing and watch The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills, and eat ice cream and all those sorts of things. But it was actually really important experience because when I was there, I found out more about the lives of the people that I was researching. And of course found out that idea that I had in my head of how they lived, particularly the idea that I think I'd spent kind of a year chasing after that. It wasn't a vision, but if you know if this was a romantic story, then I had that vision of living by the sea and dedicating myself to get myself through that afternoon. And then of course I got there and I found out that the monks of Lindisfarne were kind of living it up! They had really rich farmland, they had like these exquisite blue glass chess sets which have recently been unearthed, that they'd been trading with Vikings. I mean, that's why Cuthbert went to a more isolated island because he was like "Well, it's all getting a bit decadent over here on Lindisfarne lads!" And that's why the Vikings raided them because, you know, it was a rich place. And I think that was a really important thing for me, and for the project to like realise the extent to which the idea that I had about the human capacity to seek out isolation and for that to be like a really important creative thing. Not only people like Agnes Martin, who are more modern doing it, its a lot more complicated, but also the people who were doing it in the year 500 weren't doing it how I imagined it. I think in a way every project that I go on becomes like a journey for me. So like with Seaworthy Vessel, it started out where I was questioning whether I would be seaworthy, and I went on this whole journey. I was like, ah, everybody is seaworthy, -we should celebrate our own value. And with Book of Hours, it's been more like I started out, I think like, how can I turn my suffering into art? And how can I dedicate it for a cause? And how can I be, when faced with isolation, have the grace of like, you know, some spiritual figure that I imagined being really gracious and not having pain from isolation. But then kind of a lesson I've learned is like, well, of course those things are hard because humans are built to connect with each other. And humans are...where it's equally part of our nature to have a nice time when it's available to us. So that's what going to Lindisfarne I think kind of really crystallised for me. Also, just the idea that when we look at great artists and we say "Oh, well, the universal thing about all those people is that they had great suffering." -that's such an oversimplification. Because it's like, well, actually, the universal thing about all humans is that we've all suffered, it's just the artists make that into art and the rest of us just get on with it.

**Colin Hambrook**

And there's kind of a sense underneath of all of this work, which is about valuing genuine connection with yourself and with others. And talking about that as a radical act, especially considering the ways in which we're conditioned. How does the idea of creating watch times within the Book of Hours relate to this idea of genuine connection, and what for you is a moment of genuine connection?

**Letty McHugh**

That thing of connection being a radical thing has been in my practice for a long time, because I've been very influenced by situations and the idea that I've taken from situations into my work, is the idea that we live in a society that's designed to distract us from ourselves, and to find ways of connecting with ourselves or genuinely connecting with other people is a radical thing. I think when I started researching into the Book of Hours, one of the things that appealed to me was that they had watch times throughout the day. So they had different prayer cycles for every day of the year, based on different watch times. And I saw the prayer through that as a way of, you know, creating a moment of reflection and creating a moment to connect with yourself or to try and connect with, I'm going to say the universe, but maybe some people might call it like a universal consciousness. And I thought, how would I recreate that? Because I'm not going to say the rosary eight times a day. So for me, I thought, well, the way that I connect with myself is to write, I started setting watch times for myself, where I would write for a short amount of time, a certain number of times a day. And I found it really difficult. So a big misunderstanding that I had at the start of the project was the idea of a 24 hour clock. So understanding of book of hours, as telling you what to do 24 hours a day. But of course, the period when those books were most popular, they didn't really have a 24 hour clock in the way that we have a 24 hour clock. And everything was a lot looser, in a way that suits me a lot better. So like the title of The Early Morning watch time, translates as 'at first birdsong'. So rather than being necessarily, exactly at 5am, it's like when you first hear a bird. And also there's this great stuff about certain prayers that you're supposed to say in a literal translation for the entire night, but because people aren't very good at that kind of thing, they have like this whole system of substitutions. So if you say it for like an hour, you can kind of count it as the entire night. So that allowed me to be a lot freer with the watch times I was creating for myself, and then I started coming up with more playful titles for like my modern watch time. So it'd be stuff like, 'Immediately After a Way Too Early Zoom Call' watch, 'After First Sip of Coffee' watch, that kind of thing. I did all sorts of stuff like, I would write based on the certain days in the moon cycle. And having that bit of the universe being in charge of when I was writing was quite freeing, and having it not be quite as literal some really interesting work came out of just making myself write at random times of the day, letting go of it a bit and connecting with myself and the world around me through writing.

**Colin Hambrook**

It's very poetic process and application. I'm guessing a lot of poetry has come out through this, setting those those those watch times?

**Letty McHugh**

Yeah, it's been really interesting, actually, because I haven't written poetry since I was 18. So quite a long time ago, I'm 30 now. And in the Book of Hours I've written quite a lot of poetry. I actually put the Developing Your Creative Practice bid into the Arts Council to work with some poetry mentors. So one of the things that has come out of this process is that its sort of made me into a poet.

**Colin Hambrook**

Fantastic. And it's going to be an actual book, isn't it?

**Letty McHugh**

Yes. This is where I say confidence statements. But yes, there is a collection of writing that's in process and it is going to be an actual physical book. It's going to be quite a different book to what I imagined when you and I first had a conversation in 2020 about this idea that I'd had. And I think it's going to be a book that weaves sort of the story of the last 18 months together with some of the poetry that I've been writing, and yeah, we'll be putting that together into a printed book.

**Colin Hambrook**

Going back a bit to some of our other conversations through this process; you've talked quite a lot about art theory, and your relationship to art theory. And through the development of the Book of Hours, we've talked a fair bit about debunking art theory and taking what's useful and not getting too hung up on the rest. Do you want to say something about some of the references that you've found useful in this research in terms of its relationship to art theory,

**Letty McHugh**

It's quite interesting that you used the word debunking, because I think my relationship with that theory is that I love it but I don't love the sort of gatekeepery elitist, that can surround it. There's a lot of people who would like to keep people away from art theory. Most of my art theory is kind of self taught, I've learnt it through books and just what I'm enthusiastic about, just what makes me interested. Sometimes it can feel a bit like people who have more traditional approach to it, and know the name of every philosopher that's ever lived, can be a bit sniffy towards people like me, who've just sort of picked it up through enthusiasm. And I think if I'm trying to debunk anything, it's that. It's the idea that you should just be into art theory because it's interesting to you and because it's useful. And I do find it really useful in my creative practice and I think a big part of that is just that somebody else has already done all that hard thinking for you and then you can kind of build on that. As I mentioned earlier, one of the major theories that has influenced my practice is situationism, and that idea that is put out by Guy Debord in The Society of the Spectacle, is that in a capitalistic society we're surrounded all the time by spectacle; it's designed to distract us from ourselves and each other. And his kind of proposition was that we need is to do a revolution and I think at the end, he sort of says, have a society where we kind of indulge in complete freedom and the pleasures of the flesh or something like that? Like the sensuous pleasures of existence, which I've always kind of envisioned as just everybody just kind of like laying about on chaise longues! And that's like, for me, I don't think practical to be honest, Guy Debord, I don't necessarily know how well that would work! So when I say about keeping what's useful, to me it's useful -that question of how do you create new meaning, new thought, in a society where work so constantly bombarded by spectacle and new information? How do you create a moment of connection, but then leaving the other stuff that I don't think is particularly useful? To me as an artist, at least, you can just pick and choose and that idea of connection is really important to this particular project.

**Colin Hambrook**

The idea of connection was very kind of simple and straightforward in the Seaworthy Vessel project, where you had this very poetic way of visually representing your relationship to yourself or to loved ones. And it's become a lot more sophisticated, I think, through the Book of Hours project. The thinking has been much more almost academic in researching how this idea of genuine connection relates to art theory and to situationism. And I guess within situationism, it's very much about context and valuing the context in which the art is made and how that connects with your audience. Is that kind of how you see it?

**Letty McHugh**

My approach is sort of twofold. So I spend all this time doing all this reading because it's interesting to me and I really value like I said, like the questions that art theory can help us to ask, that are maybe more sophisticated questions that I would have just come up with on my own. But then I think a lot of the time, when I'm making the actual art, it's like, my brain is gonna make what its gonna make. So like, the theory doesn't always completely translate into the finished work, but I do think that thinking of how you communicate ideas is always there. Like the idea of co-oping the spectacle was sort of implanted into my brain when I was very young, and I think always comes out. That's why I always end up making large scale installation work. Like with Seaworthy Vessel, I made a 1000 paper boats, and when they're all together it's a spectacle. And that's the point, its that a spectacle on that scale makes you stop and think. It's quite interesting because Seaworthy Vessel, even though I kind of only officially worked on it for 2019 and the first couple of months of 2020, because of when I first had the idea and kind of the nature of my illness and sort of the career gap that I was having at that time, I'd actually been thinking about the project for about three years before I got the chance to make it happen. Even before I started talking about in public, I already had quite a clear idea with Seaworthy Vessel that metaphor is really important in my work. And that was the metaphor, was that these handmade boats coming together on such a large scale and kind of what it would symbolise about... A lot of the projects about my connection to my great grandfather, who was injured in the Merchant Navy, and he became disabled. His hands were crushed, and then I couldn't work because my MS affected my hands. So the idea of like hand making all these boats and what that would mean was already quite, quite clear. Whereas with Book of Hours, I had been thinking about it for like 10 days before we had our first conversation about it. I think that's the more intellectual part for me, its kind of figuring out, finding what the metaphor is going to be. Well, I think it is because I'm always learning and evolving as an artist and a person. And I think it's a more... it's kind of a more complicated subject matter, this idea of like, how can you connect with yourself? How can you make space to kind of explore your suffering through art without becoming a sort of person where you're making yourself suffer for your art, is kind of a more complicated idea. But I hope that by the time the project is finished, it will feel as straightforward as Seaworthy Vessel does. That the job of communicating all these complicated ideas will become straightforward and won't feel as intellectualised.

**Colin Hambrook**

And that sense of place is very important to you in all of this as well, and the Northeast, that history of the Anchorites in the Northeast. I can almost kind of feel that, as you were talking about that moment at the beginning of lockdown and sort of taking on this sense of being an Anchorite, was a kind of an initial kind of impulse, an initial thought that has kind of generated a lot of this research. Could you say something about the sense of place and the importance of being in the Northeast and the Anchorites in the Northeast that you've been researching?

**Letty McHugh**

The Northeast is such a beautiful and fascinating place, and I'd love to say that it became important in my work for like, intellectual reasons. But the truth is that it's just that I've been going on holiday to the Northeast my entire life. I think making art is a bit like making a jigsaw puzzle of all your weird life experiences and kind of putting them together to make a picture. That was the frame of reference that I had, when at the start of lockdown, I was having an MS relapse, and it was really difficult. I'd had the experience of going to Lindisfarne several times on family holidays, and feeling really at peace there. So that's what my brain grabbed on to in that moment, was that image. There's these famous sheds on Lindisfarne that are made out of wooden fishing boats turned upside down, so that the whole of the boat becomes the roof of the shed. So in lockdown, I sort of pictured living in one of those on the coast of Lindisfarne. The sea is a common theme in my work, I think because I love the sea and then I spend a lot of time thinking about it. So I have all these thoughts about how it's like the perfect metaphor for the human condition. And its the same thing, it was like that's where I imagined being peaceful. And then as I sort of came out of that moment, and I think really sort of tried to understand why is that what I imagined. I've always been really interested in St. Cuthbert and the idea that he was on Lindisfarne, which is like one of the most isolated places I've ever been to. And he was like, "This is not enough" and went off onto another island to be entirely alone. Like, I've always been really interested in that and I've kind of imagined myself into that scenario in two ways. So one is like imagining it as a writer, it being the kind of thing that I would do and be like, I need to go to an entirely remote island to write. And the other is imagining it as the kind of person who is so chatty, that I would drive somebody to go and live on a completely isolated island! And then like the Northeast has such a fascinating history, because you know, of all the kind of Saxon activity that went on there, like the early Christian activity, there were flipping loads of hermits in that part of the world! I researched this really interesting woman whose name I don't really know how to pronounce, but I'm going to go for Hieu, who founded Hartlepool Abbey, and she followed this teaching of hermitage and I found a prayer to her that I was really interested in, where people were prayed to her, inviting suffering so that they could sort of achieve spiritual enlightenment, or, as we would maybe call it or like be closer to God. And that was also really important to the project because I started doing that thing of like, that's so weird. Why would you invite suffering? But then it became the comparison. I think we still do that. I think we still do that, as artists, I think we still do it, you know, no pain, no gain, no spiritual growth without suffering. Like I think that is an idea that we still have. I'm just fascinated by people who decide to brick themselves up in a cell, because why would you do that? But then again, as you research it, all sorts of stuff comes out like that you had like a special hatch, and people brought you like quite nice meals three times a day. There was a programme on Radio 4 earlier in the year called The History of Isolation, and on that they talked about three Anchoresses. So like three nuns who bricked themselves up, but they put their cells so that they could chat to each other all day and they had a cat that they shared between the three cells. So again, it's the same thing of like, turns out it's not how you imagined it. But yeah, I think the Northeast comes out in my work both because it's kind of indirectly where my family comes from and because it's just so beautiful, and it has such a fascinating history, and I have a vague knowledge of it from going through a lot of English Heritage properties there over the years.

**Colin Hambrook**

I really fascinated to see how all of this actually comes together and comes out into a piece of artwork because you're kind of picturing producing a poetry book, but also this is going to be an installation, and possibly a performance or performance is kind of involved in some way as well isn't it?.

**Letty McHugh**

Yes, I'm so it's kind of an irony of this project that it started out with the idea of it being entirely online, because that is what is accessible to me when I'm unwell. But also because I have this long standing frustration with making large scale installations, and then not being able to find anywhere to show them, to get photographs of them. Like, Seaworthy Vessel, I made 1000 paper boats and I've never seen them all out at once. So I was definitely like off the large scale installation bandwagon, and then I had this idea for a Book of Hours to make my own version of one of those boat sheds at Lindisfarne. And it was just too good not to do it! I just liked it too much. So I'm very fortunate now to be a studio holder at Keighley Creatives in my hometown, and we have a big project space. So I've got that booked out in October, and I'm going to be making a textile installation and the idea is to create a version of what I envisaged as the perfect space to be chronically ill in. The idea of it is also that it kind of challenges the idea of whether or not I could ever actually exist. Hopefully it will be quite a good visual metaphor. It's gonna have soft text embroidered on it, quite excited about it. And then yeah, I think talking, I say talking instead of performance because the word performance frightens me a little bit and talking does not. There's definitely going to be a video aspect to the project and I'm going to be kind of doing a voiceover to the film work. And I think it'd be really interesting to get something together where there'sthe films and potentially even the installation can be up and I can kind of, like an early Christian sort of travelling, taking the word to the people, tell the story of this artistic journey that I've been on. And kind of the lessons that I've tried to learn over the last year or so.

**Colin Hambrook**

Wow! Fantastic. I can't wait for it to happen. The plan is for Keighley Creatives to host this work early next year, is that right?

**Letty McHugh**

Yes, we are in talks about exactly how it's going to work in practicalities. Unfortunately, you know, practicalities do exist. We can't just imagine things as I would like to do. So hopefully, as the sort of last hurrah of my associateship with DAO, we will be having this amazing event at Keighley Creatives that will kind of bring various different aspects of the project together and the print book will be there and I'll have my talk, and it'll be excellent. We don't know when it is yet, but when it happens, you should come!

**Colin Hambrook**

Definitely. I really look forward to it. It'd be a really good reason to come up to Keighley and really enjoy that, sometime in Spring '22 I think isn't it?

**Letty McHugh**

Yes.

**Colin Hambrook**

That's the plan. Great. That's brilliant, Letty. It's been really fabulous talking to you as you always. You kind of set my mind at all different tangents and it's very... I love the depth and the breadth of your kind of thought processes and where your art making takes you. Yeah, deeply impressive. Thank you.

**Letty McHugh**

Thank you Colin. Lovely to chat as always.

**Ian Rattray**

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