

Aidan Moesby & Claire Doherty – ‘Affecting Change’ – A Blue Skies Conversation

'Affecting Change' is a conversation between artist, curator and writer Aidan Moesby and artistic director and producer Claire Doherty. Speaking between Newcastle and Bristol, they discuss leadership, change and the significance of context in curating and producing.

Aidan Moesby: Thank you for joining and me taking part in the conversation. I was wondering if we could start just by introducing ourselves.

Claire Doherty: So, I'm Claire Doherty and I'm a producer and artistic director. And I was the Founder / Director of an organisation called Situations, which over about 15 years produced arts projects in the public realm in this country and internationally.

And underpinning Situations was always a commitment to change, a commitment to the belief that the arts are transformative. And one of the reasons why I was so interested in the public realm or unconventional locations, if you like, was that immediate and direct connection with people and place. So that for me, my writing and my producing for many years has been at the heart of what I do, and it's a continuous learning process. And in 2017 I took over the Directorship of Arnolfini for 18 months, guiding it through its recovery. And took many of the principles that I had always worked with into that institution, so it was really interesting - we'll talk a bit about that I'm sure - thinking about a venue based institution, a 60 year old institution, from the perspective of someone who'd worked in the public realm. So, sort of taking in those principles of connection and relevance into that institution.

Aidan Moesby: It was interesting to see the transformation of the Arnolfini.

Claire Doherty: So, then I finished that in January 2019. And since then I've been working, taking a pause really and deciding what the next step is for Situations - there's some interesting things brewing.

You know this work is so intense. So, I'd had nearly 20 years of commissioning projects in a great intensity. So, it's been a really brilliant year just having the opportunity of working with a number of different people. And at the moment, in response to Covid, I'm now program director with the producer David Micklem of a summer program for 200 producers to come together to rethink their practice towards change and greater relevant organizations. It's a temporary program, it's eight weeks, but we wanted to do something that's been very rapid, sort of programming at warp speed. And obviously we we're just really sensitive to the fact that for everybody, the context is shifting on a daily basis, whether you're furloughed or just been made redundant or employed and trying to save things. So, we're trying

to design a program that allows you to some spaces and some support to rethink the future.

So that's what I'm working on right now.

Aidan Moesby: Just really briefly, how did you get into doing this and what brought Situations around?

Claire Doherty: So, I studied art history and then was at the Royal College of Art in the early 90s studying curating. And it was a really, really interesting time in the early 90s, mid 90s to be studying contemporary art because it was kind of on the tail end of the YBAs and the art world in itself was going through this massive change before it became in a way linked with the fashion world and commercialised to the extent that we see it now.

The single story, which sort of led to why I'm doing what I'm doing, is that someone came to speak to us who was called Elizabeth Ann Macgregor, who is now the Director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, and she was Director of Icon Gallery in Birmingham. And we were very privileged to have lots of amazing people come and speak to us at the Royal College, but she was the only woman director who came to speak to us, who talked about context and people and impact. And I basically said that I just want to go work with her. So, I applied for a coordinator job, I got into that, I went to work Icon. And the week that I arrived at Icon, they became one of the first galleries to receive Lottery funding for major capital development. So, in my very first job, I was - in a very junior way - involved in thinking about the transformation of an organisation and the mood of the new building. So really over those five years that I was there, we did two years of curating in the gallery and we did two years of commissioning out in Birmingham. And it was that experience that laid the foundation for Situations.

So, it was inviting artists to work in the context of Birmingham, working with people on co-created projects at very early stages, this is 97' / 98.' You know, it's interesting now with the debates around participation and co-creation, because we did a conference in 97' called Process and Participant Artist and Audience. And at that point it was quite unusual to have a gallery where all of us were called curator, but we work right the away across gallery, exhibitions, engagement and offsite projects. So, it was completely integrated. And that was quite rare at the time. But the experience of that was, probably like you in a sense, I think it's through the experience of curating and producing and working with others that you can kind of see where your values lie, perhaps see what you do differently.

And I think we had an understanding at Icon there, that we all brought different skills and experiences. We didn't just produce the same kinds of projects. So, I left there in 2000 and then I set up Situations in 2002, so it was exciting times.

Aidan Moesby: I definitely want to ask more the whole gallery model and where did the opportunities exist and is it about time to change all those? So, should I introduce myself? So, my original training was in environmental sciences and very interested in environmental activism. And then from that, moving into thinking that people were quite important, and it wasn't just about the planet. And then from there I got involved in British Trust for Conservation volunteers and training to be a project manager - practical skills and working with hard to reach people.

And then I became much more interested in the therapy than the environmental. I did a Master's in art and psychotherapy. And then worked a lot with children who have been sexually abused. And then I moved to New Zealand and worked in a special program - dual diagnosis for abused and traumatised kids.

Claire Doherty: Whereabouts was that?

Aidan Moesby: I was in Christchurch, which now has some brilliant programmes after the earthquake, of gap filler and things about public participation in the city and activating the city through art and culture. And then I became too unwell to practice, and I had to think about what it was that I was going to do.

And then because of the importance of word and art... So generally, you become an art therapist by coming through the art field, and I didn't have that, I came through the therapy field. Factually I was slamming in Bristol in the early 2000s and I got my first residency at a primary school in Barton Hill. So, I was still interested in the people that were difficult to reach. And then my practice changed into becoming more visual. Having been diagnosed with a severe mental health disorder - all the stigmatisation - my phone stopped ringing and just my life totally emptied out. So, as a result of that, I'm interested in campaigning and challenging stigma and pushing forward.

I got my first major residency at DCA. And it totally changed my perspective. And previous to that, my opinion was that disabled people are continually set up to fail and yet there's negotiations to be had and conversations to be had. And also, about the critique around disability arts, I was interested in that. And I went and did a Master's in Curating.

Claire Doherty: And where did you do that?

Aidan Moesby: Sunderland with Beryl Graham, so it was a lot of digital stuff, but there was absolutely nothing mentioned about disability. And so now all my things

are coming together, and I'm interested in the internal cycle, emotional weather and the external physical weather. And I'm doing a PhD in climate change and mental health and curating and disability.

And then I'm also doing a residency at MIMA through Disability Arts Shropshire, which have put three disabled curators into mainstream organisations. So, MAC's already had one, I'm at MIMA and then Wysing is the other organisation.

So, all my work is around that climate change and mental health agenda. And everybody thinks about climate change - if it's a flood, you've got to dry your sofa and carpet, but nobody thinks about the actual mental health stuff. And finally, last year I did a Clore course, and for years I had been banging on the outside and saying, 'it's not good enough. It's got to change.' And then my takeaway from the Clore course was to make my own table and invite people to my table. And that has been the single thing that has transformed my practice.

Claire Doherty: I don't know how you found the debate during Covid but it feels to me that it very easily becomes binary. Doesn't it? About the arguments around institution versus individual, about an ableist culture versus disability. And I think if anything, what I've found most hopeful is actually the more sophisticated understandings of the ecologies and that's not turning a blind eye to inequalities and power dynamics. They exist, absolutely.

But it was really interesting, we're having this conversation aren't we the morning after the announcement last night of a major funding package for the arts, which is really, really brilliant news. And I think that there is a question of course, of how the decisions are made and how that's distributed and how do we push through a more inclusive, more relevant cultural ecology and sector.

And I think that there's enough of us who believe in that to be pushing through change. We won't solve everything, of course not, but let's try. And I think there's something, as you said for you out of Clore, which is 'let's take action rather than poke sticks from the sidelines. But I hear in your story there a sense of finding yourself limited / delimited by the way in which the art world is constructed, and the visual art form connected to the market and separated from performing arts - it kind of creates boundaries for you.

I wanted to ask how you found whether that changes when you're curating rather than being the artist. So, if you're rethinking about MIMA, for example, are you thinking within your role as a curator, or are you thinking of that residency in terms of being an artist?

Aidan Moesby: I'm thinking of that definitely as being a curator. But I'm bringing with me some of the things which I feel are important as an artist. The other thing

from the Clore course, was that I make art not as an end in itself, but as a beginning, and I make art in order to bring people together, to have a conversation, to catalyse positive social change. And that's what I want to do as a curator. I know the conversations are different as a curator, because I haven't grown up with the art school and that process I can say there's a different way, but also I'm a victim - well, that's a terrible word - but I experience the deficits of that as well in the way that the art world is constructed.

So, I think bring a gardener in, bring a weather person in, bring a psychiatrist in, just an ordinary person from the street in - where can we go with this conversation? And certainly within MIMA, it's definitely viewing it as a curator, but trying to have different conversations and bringing different people into those conversations and not necessarily viewing it as putting some work on a wall and then that's job done. Because I think my job as a curator goes way beyond that. I'm doing it from home now, so I'm not in the gallery and all those kinds of inconsequential meetings and things like, 'Oh, what's that over there?' That's where the learning happens. And that's what I'm really missing.

Claire Doherty: Think about how valued that will be when you go back. I think that's going to be the really interesting thing about, whatever the cultural experiences that people can have with us in a museum or a gallery or outdoor arts or whether form - I think we're going to recognise them as vital to our lives. So, what a fascinating context for you to be working in, particularly as MIMA has played such a fantastic role in regard to its immediate community. Eleanor Morgan's piece in the Guardian about how that museum has in a way re-appropriated its, its resources to work in a different way. And what that says about what they want to do in the future there. For you, what a fascinating context to go back into.

Aidan Moesby: Of a team that wants to talk about disability and it's not all about discipline, it's about training me, but yes, I've got to give and am more than prepared to give something back and change that institution. When we look at the ACE figures in February of that report that came out and how many disabled people are represented in culture and within the organisations and I look around my local ones - the Baltic, for instance, absolutely no one identifying as having a disability.

I find that really difficult to believe when the Northeast has a higher proportion of disabled people. And similarly with Black Lives Matter, I know that it's slightly different down in Bristol, but it's still...

Claire Doherty: No, it's still the same problem. It's got to change. It's essentially 'let's stop mucking about.' I think what Watershed has been doing under the Directorship of Clare Reddington, who's incredibly impressive in this area. And her and I, when I was at Arnolfini, we initiated this project called the Bristol Cultural Standard, which

has been taken on and reframed and in a slightly different way. But essentially it was about saying how do we make a pledge and a commitment to diversifying our workforces without understanding why that isn't happening and fast enough? So, there were a set of open sessions across the city to think about what the barriers were.

And it's complex, it's really complex. It goes back a long-time way in terms of education and opportunities. It goes across, particularly in Bristol, according to why segregation is happening within the city. But also, I think one of the starkest things for me was culture change. I think this is beginning to change, but certainly within the last five years let's say, there was an emphasis on recruitment. So, recruitment drive and the kind of university widening participation agenda, but not necessarily within arts organisations, then a consideration of organisational culture. And I think Sade Banks from Sour Lemons talks about this brilliantly, she's a brilliant young woman who's inspiring leadership change. And she talks about being, I think she was an intern at the Bush Theatre and saying how the culture of the organisation made her feel like she didn't belong. And in that circumstance, they really took on her experiences.

But from the language used, from the working times that you have, from all of this unconscious bias in terms of the way organisations have run. And I feel like I'm still learning so much about how to understand that and that applies to mental health also, that applies to knowing when you can and knowing when you can't help, knowing actually what kinds of support you need. And I think in our industry, particularly in the public funded sector, there's such an emphasis on working for passion and the kinds of hours that are demanded - that all needs to change, but I'm hopeful.

I'm seeing enormous changes across the industry now. I think this younger generation of cultural leaders that are coming through will carry with them the commitment to doing that. But the burnout is a real problem I think within the industry. It's about how do we really understand that? So, to take your points about the Northeast, my question would be, what are the barriers? What's holding people back from applying for those jobs? And then what's holding people back from staying in the industry because I suspect that's one of the problems is it's just too hard in terms of their organisational cultures.

Aidan Moesby: But I think it is about language. And I was reading a report where if you take out one word like competitive or if you take out these series of words, you'll get more women applying. Also, I think there's something is about the invitation - and I'm always banging on about the importance of invitation and the fact is that if you say, 'Oh, come around sometime' that never happens. But actually,

if you say, 'come around at four, we'll have tea and cake,' then it's going to happen and it's explicit. And then it's up to you to host really well.

The local arts partnership did a climate change forum in February. And I ended up being on a panel of six white men. I was the fifth to speak, and no one mentioned it - that we were sat in a room, largely full of women...

Claire Doherty: Did you mention it?

Aidan Moesby: What do you think?

Claire Doherty: I was going to say.

Aidan Moesby: And where are the women? Where are the people of color? And you can't do everything at once, but you've got to make small steps. The International Curators Forum largely works with the diaspora, but I think there's a lot of similarities between the marginalisation of black people or people of color and disabled people. And basically, anyone who is marginalised, if you get it right for one sector, you're doing pretty well for getting it more correct for others. And because there is still a stigma within the art world...

Claire Doherty: Let's dig into that a bit because there's so much there isn't there, that I've been really conscious of. I think one of the things that's really interesting is as a producer or a curator, if you like, is where your knowledge comes from.

So, I think that there's an interesting thing within the visual arts world, I would say in particular, because it's connected to the market in a way that the performing arts aren't, that they're connected to a different market. Ours is a market driven sector that has primarily operated on the basis of an individual or collective's cultural capital. Right? So that's how we understand our visual arts world to work. And it's of course diverse in the sense that there's a spectrum of approaches. So, there's both the kind of more visible commercially minded artists right the way through to much more grassroots works that aren't connecting into that market and everything in between.

But I would say that, certainly where / when my career began in the early 90s, the job of a curator at that time was primarily a curious one. So, it had a set of skills that you built over time, which was about acquiring knowledge. So, going in search of artistic practices.

And if you were connected into a set of galleries or institutions that were presenting institutions, let's say, like Icon or Baltic or Whitechapel or any of those or Tate Liverpool or Tate London, then you were kind of on this network of knowledge exchange. And of course, everybody had their different ways of getting to know artistic practices and seeking out young artists and visiting studio after studio, and if

you were lucky enough international travel and biennials. But I think it's really important to acknowledge that that early 90s kind of training was about word of mouth and was about the kind of cultural capital that then circulated as the market increased and the number of biennials increased by the late 90s, early 2000s and the art market then exploded - that one was finding one's information primarily, this was pre-explosion of Google, from art magazines, from exchanges and from studio visits and degree shows and all those things.

And I think what's happened in the last 20 years has been that the exchange of information has exploded, but I think there is still the principle of if you're an institutionally based curator, where are you getting your information from and what are you basing your decisions on? And there will be some curators that are basing it on believing in an artist and wanting to show their work to reach people because they believe it's important. And I think then you have to ask yourself, how are you making those value judgments? So, they'll be both influenced by your peers and by critics, but also influenced hopefully by your knowledge of context, who is the audience that you're curating for?

So, I think to then bring in your question, your crucial question, which is why are there so few disabled artists, for example? And why is disability not there front and center as a fundamental life experience to be explored, the same would be artists of color? So, I think then the question becomes about saying, how do we make that the norm and not a kind of specialism? So how do we say actually that's a fundamental part of life experience and therefore should be just naturally part of the way in which you seek out artists?

Aidan Moesby: How do we avoid tokenism, siloisation? It's like, 'Oh, we've got a show, we must get a person of color, we must get a woman in.'

Claire Doherty: I think, first of all, that would assume that the people doing the selecting aren't people of color or women or someone with a disability. I think this is why it's a fascinating and complex process of change. Some people would argue, I know there's very vocal opinions out there to say, 'let's dismantle the institutions, that's the way of doing it. And we need an arts sector that's equitable and we need to completely rechange it.' I don't share that opinion. I feel that we should change from within. And I'm excited about that because I can see it happening, I don't think it's going to solve everything, but I can see it happening.

So, the first question would be let's change who's running organisations, let's change who's making decisions, let's change who are the people in positions of power and funding agencies. That's going to automatically change who then is supported.

Aidan Moesby: How do you initiate that change?

Claire Doherty: I think it's happening, but I think the question has to be what is positive action? So, I think in a sense you have to go in search of and support and understand a leadership journey, having been in those leadership roles myself, I understand that you desperately need around you a support network and the ability to fail and the ability to learn on the job. And there's a whole set of skills that you need in order to lead those organisations that are hard won. And I think any sort of positive action support to change the demographic of who is running our organisations or making those decisions need some serious support.

I think Artistic Directors of the Future is a really good as example, because it's about supporting the journey and shadowing. And I know that we'll see out of that scheme some real change in the sector.

Aidan Moesby: I think that thing about support of failure is really, really important, so that you can make mistakes and fail in a safe holding contained environment. That's how you learn and reflect rather than going, 'Oh my God, I've made a mistake, or they have made a mistake - let's fire them.' Or 'you'll never get another job.'

I want to raise a couple of points. One is that I know I want to be a cultural change maker and set an agenda, but I also know that I don't have the ability to lead an organisation. I'm really good at getting people on the bus, but I'm not very good at necessarily driving it. How do you exert agency and power and set the agenda when it's generally the people who are at the top of the hierarchy who are setting the agenda?

Claire Doherty: Look, I think there's different ways to lead. I really believe in that. I think there'll be some organisations or groups or collectives where a collaborative leadership really works.

Aidan Moesby: The place of culture in society - when I go to Scandinavia, which I do a fair bit, and I've sent like millions of emails off to curators in the UK and very few return, you can go to Scandinavia, you can say, 'Hey, I'm in town' and they go, 'yeah, let's meet for coffee.' I've met directors of organisations at the drop of a hat, just by saying 'I'm in town, I'm doing some research. Can we meet?' And very few people respond in that way in the UK. And then you go to somewhere like Helsinki and see the library there, Oodi, a library given to the people of Helsinki for the celebration of their independence. And they have 3D printers, a recording studio, VR suites, overlocking sewing machines, wide format printers without being at university - it's just on your library card. Absolutely incredible. And the value, but it's not just that, it's the fact that you can go to the opera or the theater on your library card for free, because that's the value of culture.

And that's a great democratisation, how they view culture in Scandinavia is different. I'm not saying it's perfect, it's got its flaws, but that gives so much power to the person and the ability that 'I can do that.'

Claire Doherty: I guess the question I would have then is what does that tell us that we could hope to change here? Because it's a very different culture here. That's the social democratic model. So therefore, let's work with what we have and the flaws of our system and recognise the inequalities and thinking about what I'm heartened by is that last night's news of this investment means that the case for culture is winning. That it's not simply an economic argument, though that is important in terms of what the industry contributes, but most importantly that it contributes to the nation's soul, to its wellbeing, and that it brings about extraordinary transformations, individual and societal ones.

So, I think that feels hopeful. I'm sort of hopeful of that. I think there's an interesting question around hope, which is there's a difference between a kind of dreaming and then a sort of practical hope. So, I guess my proposition would be, what could we start to change, that isn't just a dream? What can we start to push for? Because we have seen change in the last decade in terms of who is supported. And I feel like the acceleration that Black Lives Matter has brought about in the past month to six weeks means that there's no more time to just sit back and wait for it to happen at a slower pace.

So, the context of Covid, we should not be removed, and Black Lives Matter means that there's something there to seize this moment and bring about change. So, what change do we want to see? I would say one of the things I'm interested in is this question, this term relevance. I know that when the Arts Council road tested their principles of 'let's create,' their 10-year strategy last year, there was a moment of feathers being ruffled, which seems a very long time ago now, around this word relevance and a nervousness. And there were various tweets of people saying, 'what about excellence' and everything else. And I wrote something recently, which I'll just mention here, I was trying to think of what's going on in that nervousness in the sector.

And on the one hand, I think there's a nervousness around relevance, which harks back 20, 30 years, which is a notion that somehow collaborative practice or co-creating practice is less important than the high/low dichotomy between those two things, which I think is completely exploded now in terms of how work is produced and consumed. If you talk to a younger generation, I've got 17-year-old daughter and she makes no distinction of where culture is now made, so we can park that, that's alright.

The second is how the value judgment of relevance is to be made. And I think that's what was going on in response to the Arts Council in that who judges relevance of course, is fundamental in terms of public funding policy. The third more interesting thing that I wanted to dig into is perhaps there's something in the fact that if you think about how you make your work, how your work is curated, how we produce in the performing arts sector, is there a danger of a sort of orthodoxy of approach around relevant practice?

So, in the kind of drive to greater relevance, the drive to greater local impact - addressing, one of the reasons why this argument is working around wellbeing, transformation - is there a danger that somehow... Let's imagine those individual artists that are saying, 'why should we collaborate?' That their work then is deemed irrelevant because it's not directly addressing a particular context.

And I guess my point in this text that I wrote was, surely, we have to find our own version of relevance. And that if you have worked in this way in the past, and this was certainly my experience working with the team at Situations, is that it's an intuitive thing. I would look at our work at Situations and think it's really different to some of the outdoor arts work and it's really different to Wild Works, for example, and it's really different to Artangel and it's really different to (*inaudible*) - all of those things have equal value in a spectrum of approach of public realm producing. So, you have to find your way of making work, in our case with artists often from contexts outside of where we were working with bringing in artists and working with people in a particular place. And I think that for me, that's kind of what I'm looking for, is to say, 'what I want to see change is I want to see greater connection between the work of artists of all types and people in a particular place.' But that doesn't always mean, in my view, that audience becomes participatory in the sense of their own creativity. Because what I understand to happen is that artworks can connect with someone because of their life experience, not simply because we want to create a more creative population. Does that make sense?

So often engagement is talked about in terms of creative engagement. And I don't think everybody wants to engage with cultural experiences in order to be more creative themselves. I think we need to understand it at a greater level of engagement around ideas and life experience. So, I think for me that is what I want to see change and I can see it. We won't name names, but I can see it across the country during Covid where certain organisations absolutely understood how to be relevant. Absolutely. Whatever they're capable of, in some cases almost entirely (*inaudible*), and they've still managed to be open and to really understand what their responsibility is. And others have sort of shut up shop and seen themselves as a cultural destination that has no role if there's no one to come.

So, I think that's really fascinating, because it gives you a sense of maybe what needs to change about our understanding of what the role of those organisations and those curators and those producers are. I think what's really exciting about what you're doing and your capacity for change is to think, how do you shake up those conventions of curating? How do you shake up the value judgements? MIMA is a perfect context in which to explore that, because they're already doing that. They're deeply embedded in a really progressive model. But they have a commitment to remarkable cultural experiences, remarkable art. And I think that's where it gets really exciting, when those two things come together.

Aidan Moesby: Also, during Covid they've been offering virtual studio visits, they've been doing a zine, they've really been reaching out to their constituents, maintaining a relevance or degree of relevance in an authentic manner.

Claire Doherty: And that won't work for everywhere. That's the other point, isn't it? What works in Middlesbrough, you can't then just supplant that model into Manchester or Bristol. because that is an entirely different.

Aidan Moesby: They understand where they are.

Claire Doherty: And I guess that's the thing of moving about with Situations is that we worked in Oslo, we worked in Torbay, we worked in Christchurch in New Zealand, and all those three concepts couldn't be more different from each other, despite them all being coastal. And to be honest, we wouldn't always get it right, there are lots of times when it was like a bum note, it was like, 'Oh, that didn't work. It didn't land. Why didn't that land?' Sometimes it was too early. We did something that was too radical too early, the context wasn't ready. Other times we missed connecting with the right people to understand it. But when it did work, it really, really flew. It's kind of interesting in that way.

Aidan Moesby: Can I take you back to people making or being co-constructors of creative experience and stuff like that? I'm just wondering, we're constantly after the arena, the spectacle, we want Eliasson's sun, we want something huge, we want the 50-foot puppets walking down the street - but what about the quiet spectacle, where a lot of people can experience it, but in an individual way? And then through that individual experience have a collective experience.

And I think that we're going towards that kind of stadium art. It's like, 'yeah. Wow. It's amazing.' But then where does it go after that? Where does it sit within you? Whereas I've seen some amazing works on a much smaller scale. It's like it's an itch you can't scratch. It just stays and stays and stays, and then you might resolve... not that all art has to be resolution. It can just be like, 'wow that was amazing.'

Claire Doherty: Definitely look at the work of Lynn Froggett, she's Head of the Psychosocial Unit at the University of Central Lancashire. She's a complete genius and her team, Allie, Roy and Lynn have been a really big influence on me in the last 10 years. And I originally came across her because she was working as part of a group set up by Tate called New Model Organisations, looking at the social impact of arts organisations. And basically, she worked with us over a number of years, looking at the impact of our work. And her description of what happens to someone when they encounter a work that is, if you like, beyond spectacle, so something that's unsettling rather than it confirms the status quo or offers a temporary firework moment let's say, was really, really interesting. I won't go into it enormously, but the fundamental idea is that at the moment of being unsettled, so that it requires something of you psychologically to bring yourself to it, if you like, is the greatest moment for transformation psychologically.

Now that's not to say that that can't happen through spectacle. It absolutely could and can. But it gave me the language to describe why perhaps the more radical experimental work and I'm thinking of Ingrid Fiksdal, who is an amazing Norwegian choreographer that we worked with in Torbay - contemporary dance, really strange kind of forms, amazing deep raw beats, it doesn't explain itself, there's no story, slightly Doctor Who-ish strange forms coming out of this lido - and that works really interesting in terms of thinking of that on a spectrum with say, something more, I don't know what to call it without being derogative, but a more sort of spectacle family friendly type of thing. And actually, it was totally family friendly because the kids kind of got it, because they came out and they were like, 'what's that, what's that, it's an alien.' But it's not explaining itself, it transgressive, it pushes the limits of what we know, it makes you feel slightly unsettled and slightly curious. And I think that Lynn's point is that our task is to help produce more self-reflective citizens and greater connection between people and the possibility for action.

So, in the context of climate change, I think that's really interesting to think about. Inducing a psychological state that makes you more susceptible to thinking about the future, but it's within a safe space. She gave me this phrase, which is that our artists enable us to think about things as if they were different, the sanctum created a space in which there was a sort of togetherness, if you like, and it was like a model for the future. So, I think that sounds really interesting to think of your work and project in that sense that maybe it's a way of testing what it might feel like and what those feelings are.

And of course, that's how film operates, that's how theatre operates - it puts us into a psychological state that's safe, relatively safe, to experience those feelings. You do this all the time, but when you work with academics and other experts in other

fields, they give you a perspective on your practice and a language to use. You're like, 'Oh, that's what I've been searching for.' And that's what's going on in this.

Aidan Moesby: But I think there's often an underestimation of the desire for that kind of thing.

Claire Doherty: It's interesting though, isn't it? Because I'm working with Coventry 20/21 at the moment and they're just an awesome team, completely brilliant and embedded. And they've been working for over a year on building those relationships on the ground and they just announced that UK City of Culture year is going to start in May 21 and run to May 22. And what's really interesting about their approach is they have a kind of logic model about the effect that they want to have and the impact they want to make in that place. And a lot of the discussions have been about, so what's the new version of the City of Culture programme that enables deep, meaningful, long-lasting change? And in some cases, yes, there will be mass events, but that's balanced with the kind of quiet localised work that's ongoing.

And post-Covid, there's going to be a need to really think about what's a different kind of distance work? So rather than the mass event, which we may or may not be able to do, what's a different kind of work, that's also particularly thinking of those people with underlying health conditions who may not be able to come to mass events for a very long time. So that's really interesting isn't it? To think about what might intimate encounters be. I think there's a question isn't there, maybe it's not going to be about the single timed event. Maybe time is stretched. So, you do something that can be experienced by people over a much longer period of time on their own, or different ways for people to engage across different platforms. So, I think the physical effects of what we've been through is going to affect the way we make work and how we encounter it in the coming years.

I think that it's important speaking out, writing out, all of those things. But I also think it's in the work, I think it's in the doing and listening, that's the other thing.

Aidan Moesby: Just to go back briefly to the artworld, how everything is geared up towards the main gallery and getting a relationship, but do people want to have that same experience and same career path of being in a white cube and what exists beyond that? And how can we have a viable, sustainable career on our own terms but outside of that, because it's like trying to get into the system. Whereas actually, can we change it so that we don't need to get in? We can have an ecology around us.

Claire Doherty: That's a big question for the end of this.

Aidan Moesby: Well, that's where it's brought me to.

Claire Doherty: I don't know if I'm qualified to answer that, to be totally honest with you. I think partly because...

Aidan Moesby: You were shifting things at the Arnolfini though.

Claire Doherty: Yeah, I was. Well I attempted to. I guess I would say maybe there's a different way of looking at it, which is if I was talking to a young artist or emerging artists coming out of art school right now, let's imagine that. I've already there made a value judgment that they'd been to at school, but let's imagine that that's the case. I think I would ask what are the most important contexts for you, for your work to speak it and what your aspirations are? Because I don't think there's just one route and I think the commercial galleries... I was involved in a conversation a week ago with Pace Gallery in New York. They're really progressive, really interesting in terms of the public realm. I think there's lots of commercial galleries and new commercial models that are changing how they operate and will as a result of the economic impact of Covid I'm sure too.

So, I think there's a question about how do we open up the opportunities for artists, for their work to resonate and connect in lots of different contexts? But I guess I would try and put aside the question of how I break in, because I'm not sure there's an in to break into. I think it's more about, we all feel like we're not in the room. We feel like there's a room over there that I'm being kept out of and all the decisions are being made in that room. It doesn't really exist. I think there are sort of power situations, but I think it's a much more complex sector that has increasingly new platforms in which to show and produce your work.

So, for example, it could be interesting to say, what are the new audio platforms opening up for work to be experienced on - BBC sounds or podcasts or new kinds of digital platforms that might open up completely new audiences to you. You know that I'm passionate about transforming institutions, which I won't go into, but I am because I just think we have to ask what we're saving and for whom and not just save it for the sake of saving something that's been around for a long time.

Aidan Moesby: Post-Covid or Covid has been a great democratiser, it's made certain things a lot more accessible and it's changed people's opinions of that you don't need to be in the room to have a meeting and you don't need to travel. There's been lots of benefits around that. But also, it's tinged with an ableist hue, and it's not one size fits all. And I have a slight fear that we will go back to things how they were, but also it has shown a new way of being. Technology is great when it's used well and can create those kinds of... we don't have to be in the gallery, there's lots of other ways to be sustainable and to have a career and a profile and all of that. And it's how do you do that without leaving people behind?

Claire Doherty: To finish, I think that my experience has been that the resistance to change comes from surprising quarters. So sometimes, like when I was at Arnolfini and I wanted to shake up how the galleries were used because I wanted to test or pilot what it would feel like if gallery spaces didn't feel like gallery spaces, and it was really early stages, we were just testing and piloting some ways of working. But actually, some of the conversations I have with friends who are artists were like, 'why would I want to do that Claire? I want to show my work in a relatively neutral kind of space. I don't want you to have furniture in there and people sitting reading in there.' So, you would think that might come from stakeholders who want a kind of blue-chip gallery type of experience. Certainly, very rarely came from the audience, but actually it would also come from artists, which is to say 'I want a particular type of context. I don't want things to interfere with the work.' Which for me was sort of antithetical coming from producing in a public realm because there is no such clean space, it doesn't exist.

So, I found that really fascinating and interesting and worth thinking through. The conventions of the white cube persist because certain people would view that as a meditative space cleared from other stuff in order that the work does its job. Of course, other people might find that very intimidating. So that was always my kind of question is like, how do we break down some of those conventions? So, it doesn't feel like an elitist space where you have to behave in a certain way. I think that language plays a big part to play with that. How you welcome people to cross the threshold, how people feel it's for them.

I mean, the interesting thing when you're curating in the public realm, of course, is that if there's no contextualisation, very rarely is there room to offer an interpretation. So, you have to learn to connect with people on their own terms and allow the work to speak really directly, tell its own story. And that's been a really good learning for me in terms of then noticing what museums and galleries in particular have to do in order to set up an experience. But I completely respect that colleagues in the art world, for example, will believe in those things very strongly and deliver beautifully and with great care and knowledge and expertise.

So, it's not that I'm arguing for all institutions to do away with those things. I just think it's something that I'd like to see more of, shaken up in terms of how we think about the kinds of experiences we're creating and for who.

Aidan Moesby: I know you have to go to another meeting.

Claire Doherty: It's been such a pleasure to talk to you. Thank you so much.

Aidan Moesby: Thank you, Claire. It's been great. And it's been a privilege to listen to your ideas and to have the conversation.

Disclaimer: Due to disruptions in the audio recording of the conversation there may be slight discrepancies in this transcription.

Context: This conversation was held one month after the statue of Edward Colston was pulled from its plinth and the day after the announcement of a £1.57 Billion funding package for the arts.

Aidan Moesby is a curator, artist and writer who explores civic and personal wellbeing through a body of work that is at once playful, intimate, questioning and deeply human. His practice is a socially engaged one, rooted in research and response – in conversation of many kinds. He works extensively in the spaces where art, technology and wellbeing intersect. A resident at Pervasive Media Studio, Watershed, Bristol he increasingly makes large scale, tourable works.

Moesby is currently Associate Curator at MIMA in partnership with DASH Arts within a programme to increase the representation of disabled curators within the arts ecology. He works across mainstream and disability contexts to promote diversity and equality within the visual arts; regularly facilitating and participating in discussions and events. Exploring the relationships between the outer physical weather and internal psycho-emotional weather underpins his work investigating the dual crises of Climate Change and Mental Health within a curatorial milieu.

Claire Doherty is an artistic director and producer with a particular focus on developing more relevant and responsive arts organisations and programmes. Known for her artistic direction and thought leadership in public art producing as well as ambitious multi-artform cultural programming, Claire was the Founder Director of Situations (situations.org.uk) from 2002 - 2017. Through projects such as Theaster Gates' Sanctum and Katie Paterson's 100-year Future Library, Situations became known as one of the UK's foremost producing companies in the public realm. As an Artistic Director and advisor to heritage organisations and cities internationally, Claire has been committed to rewriting the rulebook for where, how and by whom the arts are produced and experienced. She was the Director responsible for the stabilisation and rethinking behind Arnolfini's recovery in 2017-2019. Most recently she has co-led the Culture Reset programme with David Micklem, a programme over eight weeks for 200 producers to reimagine the future of arts and culture.

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