

It Comes *In Waves*

A Conversation Series

Katie

Welcome to 'It Comes in Waves' an intergenerational conversation series presented by the Women's Art Register and hosted by me, Katie Ryan. Developed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, this series will feature conversations between women and non-binary artists and arts professionals on themes of trauma, care, community and identity, among others. These conversations will facilitate knowledge sharing and support across generations by pairing emerging and early career artists and writers with some of the longest-standing members of the Women's Art Register.

I would like to begin by acknowledging that this conversation series has been produced on the unceded lands of the Wurundjeri and Boonwuring people of the Kulin Nations. I pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging. I respectfully acknowledge that this land has been home to some of the oldest stories in human history, deep time stories that document the evolution of species and recall climatic shifts. These stories have been preserved and shared through Indigenous oral traditions that continue to this day. I extend this acknowledgment to the peoples of the lands you may be listening on and encourage you to reflect upon the stories of these lands.

Today I'll be speaking with Alex Cuffe and Merren Ricketson.

Alex Cuffe describes herself as a 'non-practising' artist. She was born on the land of the Gadigal peoples of the Eora Nation and is currently based in Naarm. Her practice deals with disintegrating and reintegrating autobiographical material, unravelling story and context from emotionally haunted objects. Her outputs are often conversational, written or spoken,

and she has an auxiliary interest in the production of music. She currently is studying her masters in psychotherapy and recently had her first solo exhibition in six years at TCB Gallery in Brunswick.

Merren Ricketson has worked as an arts facilitator and educator for 40 years. Her involvement with the Women's Art Register began in the early '80s as a committee member and program coordinator. Concurrently, she established Artmoves with Helen Vivian and curated exhibitions at various venues, including the Access Gallery at the National Gallery of Victoria. After leaving full-time work she studied Auslan. Merren currently works casually at the Victorian College for the Deaf, is a Board member of The Boite, a multicultural music organisation and Education Liaison for upcoming exhibition 'Flesh after Fifty, changing images of older women in art'.

Thanks for joining me today Alex and Merren. To begin, I'd like to ask you, Alex, about your current solo exhibition, 'Love is the Length of her Hair' at TCB Gallery in Brunswick. I'm guessing that this might be the longest-running but least accessible show of your career. Could you tell us about your experience presenting work in such a turbulent time?

Alex I mean, I think it's interesting because it's also been the most well-received show I've ever had and no one's actually seen it. It's getting a few reviews, which I guess is weird.

Katie Reviews done from the documentation?

Alex Yeah, I think one person did manage to get in before it closed. So someone did see the show and then a few others haven't. And even this sort of interview as a response to it. I think it's much more exponential than anything in the past. It's weirdly inaccessible and also one of the best received things. I love how it's holding a contradiction in itself already by doing that, in what is a really, kind of wild time. I feel like I've spoken several ways around this before, but the show feels like it couldn't be more appropriate and it sort of seems kind of irky to contextualise the pandemic as any sort of positive framework to be showing work in. But I think if we try to, then it's possible to think of that as a positive... or positive too simple, but it's a powerful context for it.

Katie Yea, maybe Could you talk about what's contained in the show, like what the show was made up of, for people who haven't seen it or haven't seen the representations of it?

Alex Sure, there's sort of two primary artworks, one being a clothes rack of white t-shirts that are for sale, all of which have an individual selfie that I've taken

of myself crying over the last five years, and specifically the last five years of myself transitioning. Has been sort of documented and then I'm inviting people to purchase the t-shirts. And then that's sort of really sistered with a little humidifier that is releasing a synthetic hormone, oxytocin, which is the love hormone or the attachment hormone. And so it's like releasing trace amounts into the open air of the space. There's also a small washcloth that... [sigh] I don't think I want to say the full story of it. And there's also a small finger, a cast of my own finger, with a wedding ring attached to it that's being cut off my finger. Each of which has a really long, elaborate title sort of explaining the context of work. So it's quite easy for you to sort of see the documentation and get a sense of what the work speaks to.

Katie Yea they're quite narrative style titles.

Alex Yeah, I think I've had some... There's been some jokes. One reviewer was like just to confirm the lengthy descriptions are the titles correct? And I was like, correct! [laughter]

Katie So, you actually got married?

Alex I came really close. I was two days away, I think it was two days.

Katie OK, I didn't know if you got married officially, but then didn't do the ceremony or were just going to get married but didn't get married.

Alex Yeah. We were going to, we had all the paperwork. We spent quite a lot of money doing all the paperwork for an international wedding, in Finland. And it was a complex wedding in that it was the only way to stay with my partner. yeah... so that didn't turn out very well. And so this object, this ring, is sort of the artefact or the sort of the remainder of that commitment. And that commitment being physically intervened with, by being cut off my finger, because it got stuck and it was like a cursed object, almost quite literally cursed. So, kind of the catharsism of using the exhibition as a sort of a space to frame grief.

Katie You know, it's funny, you gave me one of those t-shirts when we first met, and I have worn it a few times during the pandemic. When I've been feeling particularly bad. And it's quite comforting.

Alex That's the first time I've had any haptic response. Like, is it helpful? Like maybe it's not or something.

Katie I think it is. It kind of like gives you license to... Feel bad. [laughter] Because

it's you publicising and recording your own grief. So then if I'm feeling really bad, it helps me to not feel so bad about feeling bad. And there's been lots of times to feel bad in the last few months... [laughter] It's been interesting, it is actually quite comforting.

Alex That's a huge relief.

Katie I wonder if other people have felt that.

Alex I got an email from a dear friend. I gave her a T-shirt and it just stayed on her floor for a very long time. And she sent me a photo of my own face crumpled up, which is almost cartoon-like, big eyes and no nose and a big mouth and tears, sitting on the floor staring upwards at her. She wrote this beautiful response about why it didn't belong on a wall or in a drawer, or a reluctance to put it placed on a body, and that the floor somehow being a space for it at that moment, it was like exhibiting on the floor. Hmm. I loved it. I thought it was so gorgeous. So the expectation to wear it or not to wear it, I mean, I don't really hold... That's not my place. So I'm always curious what it means to someone.

Katie It would be interesting to gather responses from the people that you did give them to.

Alex Hmm...

Katie Yeah.

Alex Well, once the pandemic ends...

Katie When that happens...! I'm going to ask Merren a question to switch it up. Merren, reading back through your email, just looking at all the amazing projects that you've been involved in over the years, I was wondering if you could talk about some of those in more detail? I know you've done a few exhibitions promoting the work of women and Indigenous women artists. Could you tell us a bit about what the art landscape was like at the time you were developing these shows and how they were received?

Merren When I look back, it seems to be always about access and inclusion, although in the current context that's highly contested, I suppose, because [what constitutes inclusion] it's changing in every moment. But because we'd been making slide kits to put into schools, the Women's Art Register, there was definitely a need to look at Indigenous, First Nations people. And so the most complex project we did that took three years was the 'Can't See For Lookin'

12 Koori Artists Educating'. And the outcome of that was a kit representing those 12 artists, a booklet looking at their work, and that was launched by an exhibition in the Access Gallery [at the NGV]. I'd had about three exhibitions by then at the Access Gallery, one for the Schizophrenia Fellowship, one for the Register ...ah two for the Schizophrenia Fellowship, at that stage. I had a very good working relationship with Jane Scott at the gallery so it was just automatic to go in there. But the wonderful thing about that project, as well as having those women's work in the gallery, Judith Ryan and I dispute this, I say it was the first women-only exhibition at the gallery. She says, no, the Balgo women had shown.

There were just those extraordinary moments that happen with good exhibitions, like one of the artists coming up to me and saying, 'I used to go past in the tram and think, I wish I had the courage to go in there and now my work is here'. And another woman that came up to me and said, you know, 'Art has been my AA. If I hadn't actually started painting, I don't know what would have happened to me.' The other thing that was so important about it was the multigenerational nature of it. Aunty Rachel, Aunty Connie - who had brought her weaving in. And so, you know, there were sort of things like that. And we had a week celebrating. We actually had Ruby Hunter at a concert in the Great Hall. The board of the gallery agreed to make the National Gallery entry, which was six dollars at that time, free. And we had a whole lot of cross-cultural seminars and things.

So that was very contemporary. The other project, a more revisionist project, that I worked on was 'Completing The Picture: Women Artists and the Heidelberg Era'. And that's really important to bring in Juliette Peers here. I'd been at a seminar at Melbourne Uni and this woman sort of approached me at lunchtime asking all these sort of, you know, really devious questions about an organisation I just set up with a friend. [laughs] They were quite devious! In the end, I said, 'what are you getting at?' And she said, 'I want to know if Artmoves is concerned with historical women artists as well as contemporary?' And I said, 'of course'. And this is when she let me know that she had been finding through research of modernist artists, she'd found all these artists that had gone to the National Gallery Art School, had worked with, and at the same time, as the men who were recognised as being of the Heidelberg era. And this resulted in this extraordinary exhibition of works from... Pulling out works from, you know, the dungeons of galleries. They had to get them cleaned. You know, they'd never sort of put them on their walls before, to finding key works in major collections. She co-curated it with another woman, Victoria Hammond, whereas Artmoves, that's Helen and I, we work together on getting the funding. So that sort of took about five years. We opened at Heide and by the time we closed at Heide, we had invitations

from the Art Gallery of Western Australia, the S.H. Irving, two venues, the Art Gallery in Tasmania. So it's sort of again, it was of its time. You know, it was 1990 when we started and '93 when we finished, well '95 it must have been. And again, we did education programs and things. So, I feel that my work has been about facilitating, getting people together to facilitate those extraordinary projects, pulling those threads together, I suppose.

Katie I think that is such important work. The rewards from that are also so tangible. Like if someone says to you, 'I never could have imagined myself in that space'. And then, they're there.

Merren Yes, extraordinary.

Alex Not to mention saying something along the lines 'Art is my AA', that's kind of the language of life-saving. That's the context of meaning-making that comes out of making art and giving purpose to people, that may have not felt they could access that.

Merren And an extraordinary thing happened, where a woman had a fragment of a mural that she'd done and it had been lost. I don't know how this happened, but I just kept nagging and nagging - this person, that person - and we found it at the back of a milk bar in... I think it was Williamstown. And we managed to get the six or eight panels of that mural. She didn't know that until opening night.

Katie Oh my god!

Merren You know, it was just... Shivers down the spine to even think of it! How extraordinary that was. So she... Yes, a reclaiming for her. And here it was inspiring so many people.

Katie That's beautiful. So you didn't tell her?

Merren I don't think we did. Because, you know, even if she, it would have been in the catalogue. But I'm pretty sure that even if I had, you know, in my blabbermouth way, said, 'oh, you know, we might have found this or that, oh, look, we'll probably find more of your work' or whatever. But I think to see it beautifully mounted in an exhibition space, there as a key work.

Katie Yeah. And I mean, I think the healing or life-saving capacity is one aspect, but then it is also so much about access. That you're helping people's work to be recognised who are not in the mainstream for being accepted to be talented, or worthwhile, or worth looking at.

Merren

Can I just say one other thing, too, about making connections? What 'Completing the Picture' did... I just, this is really weird. But I used to love hanging out the toilets because I would hear these women saying 'What happened to...?' They'd say to their sisters, 'What happened to our Auntie Mabel's paintings? You know, she was a painter. What happened to grandma's paintings? We should go and ask dad what happened to so-and-so's paintings'. They all started talking about their female relatives that painted and they were never valued. You know, we know Clarice Beckett's works were found in a garage. If there hadn't been a curator there or whoever that knew the value of them, they would have been destroyed. And so, you know, this just goes on in every person's bottom drawer, these treasures of creativity that people didn't value.

Katie

Definitely. And the fact that things are being or could be, should be, recorded and retained, that people do not see the value in at the present time, whether it's themselves or whether it's institutions.

Alex, can you tell us about the meaning of the title of your exhibition? 'Love is the Length of her Hair'.

Alex

It has basically two meanings for me at least. It's just firstly a very provocative thing. As soon as the words sort of come out of your mouth, it does something to my mind and to my body that feels right. That's how something always starts. It actually came from a joke with a friend while we were installing her exhibition. And she said, 'your hair is so long'. And we were sort of in this flow of making art jokes and we said 'Love is the length of her hair, the title of my new show!' And we all giggled. And then I was like, hang on that's actually gorgeous. That does say something. And on one hand, it speaks to love and hair growth as an act of care. And like one thing that I've learnt about growing hair is that it requires a lot of maintenance. It requires not just labour, but a type of love, to care for yourself, to let something grow big and that sort so stands as a metaphor.

But it also has this other, more queer/trans narrative or gender narrative around how women's genders are often perceived through hair. I know a lot of cis-gender people, cis-gendered women, that will cut their hair and will have issues going to the women's bathrooms. It's just such a dramatic marker for gender. It's almost, it could be read within that context as, you will be loved, your love will be equated to the length of your hair. You will be more valued the longer your hair is. I think this is an experience that anyone can have with growing hair and what it means, it has this phenomenal cultural impact. I don't know, it's sort of weird that we focus on it so much.

- Katie** And I guess it's even that love could be related to the length of it, whether the length is short or long. When you're saying that it can signify gender and that people have issues when their hair is not the expected length for their gender.
- Alex** Totally.
- Merren** And we did touch on the signifier of age and hair too. That thing of instantly, I think, is associated with age, the colour, the thickness, the losing of hair, all those things that older women, older people deal with. But I suppose that's right. As an instant identifier and the whole media around it.
- Katie** And I suppose it's also something that you can change easily-ish. Growing it takes a long time, but cutting it can be really fast.
- Alex** Yeah. That almost dramatic effect of reduction. Production is very slow and reduction is instantaneous. So yeah, we see that in quarantine, of people wanting to interject in their sense of self... And I feel that so often and I'm just constantly like protecting my hair. Like I'm not shaving my head, as much as I want to. And instead, kind of shaving my eyebrows instead, you know, or dying something or I've dyed my fringe or I'll dye on my brows or bleach them, shave them or I don't know, just anything but not the length.
- Katie** Yeah. And I think it's because there's so few things that we can change at the moment, everything is so out of control. So what you can do to your body or what you can affect in some tangible way feels really appealing because everything else is just in a weird, anxious stasis.
- Alex** And you know, and I don't think our bodies, collectively have ever been placed under... It's a very broad statement of saying 'never have we ever' but like for me, never have I ever experienced a collective restriction on all of our bodies. And there's such control and minimisation, for safety, about them. And so the small, minute details or variables that we do have control over. Like I've also been doing heaps of tattoos on myself and loving it and been given a lot of energy about controlling what little I have. And for me, that's just basically my body.
- Merren** And There's always, you know, living with the threat of another body and now everybody's body is a threat. I feel.
- Katie** You know, when you're distancing yourself even from your friends as if you don't trust them? This idea that we've all become vectors for disease... it's upsetting.

- Merren** Avoiding people, you know, walking and, you know, will this become our new choreography?
- Katie** And I imagine for older people, like people in your generation Merren, the fear must be much more intensified?
- Merren** It's the worry of living with Bill who's slightly older than I am. But it's actually my cousin that I work with every day. She's slightly older than I am. Her husband is then again older than us. And then there's that feeling of how hard it must be for younger people because of the worry of the future, the worry about their financial security. You know, it's sort of exposed so many fissures in our society, so many gaps, on all sorts of levels. And that's another generational gap that it's revealed, isn't it? There's gorgeous girls of your age walking down the narrow paths, arm in arm! It used to annoy me. Now it doesn't, I think, go for it! Just take as much space as you like because, you know, this is what you have got your one hour walk on the clifftop. It's sort of...
- Alex** I just want to say, [sigh] I get so angry at young people. I feel like maybe on the inside I'm a little bit older or something. I do see younger people and I don't see the seriousness in it. I try to be really serious and conscientious of all the bodies around me and sort of giving as much space...
- Merren** Actually, I'm going to interject there because I shouldn't have said your age. It is younger, it is the feeling of being invulnerable. It's why they smoke, it's why you take drugs at that age. It's why you drive like maniacs, maybe it's a rite of passage to be so secure in your life. But that doesn't mean, as you say, the lack of respect.
- Katie** I think, for the most part, people do feel this social obligation very strongly. I've noticed a lot if I have gotten a little bit of a sore throat at all... I've had a few COVID tests because I get so paranoid of the idea that I could pass it to someone. It just gets in your head and then the only way out of it is to have the test.
- Merren** That is so fascinating for me to hear. That consideration. That's another worry, you feel your own self is a threat.
- Katie** Definitely. OK, maybe we need to get back onto art. Oh, this question isn't about art... Alex, you've mentioned feeling more and less safe or accepted as a trans woman in different countries and contexts. Can you speak a bit about your experiences and perhaps discuss why Melbourne feels safer than some other places that you visited?

- Alex** [sigh] Boom! Nothing heavy, umm...
- Katie** Sorry!
- Alex** No, I love it.
- Katie** I mean we just came from talking about our imminent possible death to COVID.
- Alex** Yeah, and it's funny to jump around. It's like, what's the relevance? It feels less relevant to talk about some things or to take up space. But putting that aside. Yeah, I swear by it. I mean I don't really know much about, say, American cities, but I would say everywhere I've been to, which is mostly Europe and the UK, just feeling that Melbourne, at a felt level is by far one of the best places. And I'd love to hear if people have different experiences. Is there a better place for trans people? And I honestly just think it's Melbourne.
- Katie** That's something we can all be proud of as Melbournians.
- Merren** Yea.
- Alex** I think only until recently fully understanding why that is. I just think we've just maybe culturally matured our basics? And the importance of the basics for trans people. I love how conscientious, quite a few different layers here are. Seeing different places across Europe I don't think there is such a complex discourse happening. Counter to that sort of like Australia is a bit backwater argument, like it is. And it also is trying just as hard not to be. But yeah, I get this joy here where you walk down the street and you see another trans person, lock eyes on a tram and just like, smile lightly and then look away. And you've never seen that person before. And that can happen, if we weren't in lockdown, semi-regularly. There's a density of population of gender diverse people that I would say I have not ever seen. And the type of gender diversity that you get here, which is visibility. Whereby when I was living in Helsinki, in Finland, I was like where are all the trans women? I know a few non-binary people and some trans-masculine people. But nowhere in the community, whether in the arts or the music scenes were there visible, trans women. And it was weird because you could if you pay a lot of attention, you noticed that there were trans women around. It's just no one felt safe enough to be visible. In that, you didn't speak at a trans conference or talk or pride event because it was outing yourself and it wasn't safe and there wasn't a culture.
- Trans people exist everywhere, but we're not necessarily given the space and context to be as visible as we can, in Melbourne. I mean, it's not perfect and it needs to be a lot better, so many things need to be better. But at

least the fundamental conditions here, I think, have gotten to a point. And that's through a real history, there are a lot of really incredible trans people doing that work, making areas more accessible. And, yeah, the carry on of that is pretty powerful. And you see that in certain areas and not others. One area that it proliferated in was clubbing culture like if you're trans, you could maybe make it as a DJ or as a musician. You could be a spectacle. And from that space in which you were enabled to be, you could sort of grow a platform, grow a community, grow maybe just a single event that was safe enough for people to be in. And if you feel safe in one moment, you just want to... once you get contact to safety, you just crave it.

Katie Of course.

Alex And Merren, I think you could identify in creating those spaces in the early 90s. Once there was that electricity in the air, once that happens, people go 'Oh I want that, that feels so much better'. I'm Under all this pressure and you've just created a space, a vacuum for it, not experiencing the pain that it is to be a daily body or something. So that's why I love Melbourne because I want to live in that comfort. I don't, I'm lazy. I'm tired. I'm broken... My body. I'm getting... I'm not that old, but my body is not surviving under the conditions that I've met, in other cities and other countries, other cultures, that don't allow just the fundamental conditions of living.

Katie Because not feeling safe is also an incredibly bodily thing, like the way that anxiety manifests in your body and affects your breathing, your digestion, your organs. It does damage your body feeling unsafe, especially over long periods of time. Maybe, Merren, I could ask you about the atmosphere around WAR in the early days, because I know that you said that it provided a safe space for women?

Merren Yes. And just picking up on that, I mean, that is such a wonderful thing to hear about Melbourne. And every time I would run into anybody from, you know, say, places that you think are so extraordinary, even New York or Madrid, or somewhere and they'd say what an extraordinary place this is. They were able to recognise it. As you said, the clubbing scene, but also the music scene, the richness of it, the art scene. If you can just imagine, even when I was at uni in the 70s, it was just so exciting. This is why feminism is so important to me because it just articulated so many things that I had felt in my life. So, you know, I had the reverse. I was able to identify with so many other people, women, who were seeing the importance of feminism in their own lives and arguing. Certainly not as contested as it is now, as interesting as it is now, because everything to me seems to be thrown up in the air. But there, we were sort of discovering things together. And I suppose we

were, the women that I came into contact with, were at Monash, were in the Register. So we were perhaps, middle-class women, privileged women, that were able to have those advantages. Privileged in a surface way, you know, a lot of sort of undercurrents underneath. And you did feel safe expressing yourself. I probably felt safer than expressing myself in the embryonic stages that I would now. Because, you know, I'm very aware of different realities and theories and practices going on.

I've just been so excited lately because I found out about abolitionist feminism. And I just want to read everything I possibly can! And, you know, I came from a quite Left-Wing background where revolution could have been the answer. We thought we were going to change the world, for women. And now to hear about this movement and this sort of feeling of, you know, on your recommendation, I've been looking at Bell Hooks, Bell Hooks, is that right? And just to read that, the positive nature of that, the possibilities... So there was a very positive time in my life, then I reckon feminism became a dirty word for at least a decade. And now there has been this incredible flowering. Look, I don't really think I've answered your question, really, have I? [laughter] There were safe places intellectually. We were very aware they weren't safe physically. And one of the things in the last couple of days thinking about this knotty thread of feminism that's gone through my life is this thing I always used to think, 'we must be vigilant'. You know, it is everywhere, racism, homophobia, transphobia, it is everywhere. We really have this responsibility to be vigilant. Melbourne is a great town, but as in as quickly as you could change your hairstyle, a government or repression... This is what makes me laugh about the people meeting against the masks. Of all the other things that you could be addressing! So I think vigilance is the other thing to remain aware of how easily... There is still so much to do, I suppose.

Katie

Yeah. And I think it's interesting that you said you're almost more cautious about what you're saying now because you're aware that there's so many more narratives. I think that is a really important part of the conversation now, is accepting that there's a lot that we don't know. You know, we can speak in blanket statements about things, and I think that that's a really important thing for people to learn. It comes back to the idea of 'women' and what the Women's Art Register is? That woman is not a homogenous term and it can't be easily classified. Women are all very different and women all have very different experiences, women have different bodies and obviously trans women are included in that. And I think that is a shift that's happening at the Register, slowly in a way, because it is such an intergenerational group and there are people who haven't spent time with that idea or have their own bad experiences from the past.

As Alex and I started talking, Alex, you were asking what the Register's history was with trans women. And I had to say that unfortunately, I think it's very limited. There could have been trans women involved, that it wasn't known. But as far as I can see, it's been quite minimal. Apart from changing the mission statement a few years ago to state that the Register is 'cis, trans and non-binary inclusive'. It's really important to not just change the statement but to follow through by actually making connections with those communities and promoting the work of trans women and gender diverse artists. And Alex you said how kind of disappointing it is when in feminist surveys and women's spaces that follow-through doesn't happen. Could you maybe speak about that a bit?

Alex

I guess the first thing is, I want to preference the fact that I'm not an expert. I don't actively participate as frequently as I used to within the arts. I'm not like someone that knows everything. But I think I can speak from the experience of having an art practice for 10 years and then into my late 20's when I was twenty-seven, started to transition. And how sudden, if not abrupt... My practice kind of felt like a car crash. In the way that it was maintained and then as soon as my identity shifted, it became a bit of a ghost town. And there's lots of reasons for that. One being that thinking about practice and transition. I don't think you can transition, for me personally, my sense of identity, my practice has to come there with me. And it's hard enough just thinking about yourself rather than this external practice, whatever that is. Maybe I prioritise myself a bit more than my career. But it definitely wasn't supported through a community. It was definitely not like... Very clear that there is or was, no priority in supporting trans artists or transitioning artists or whatever, you know. It wasn't something that I... you could see and you could just see every time there would be the opportunity that it was sort of a lacklustre experience.

So we're talking about the last five years, I think. I don't want to speak any further than that or outside of my own experience. And you know, we are doing a lot of work culturally in the last ten. So, you know, keeping it within that range is when it's the most relevant. Where there are practicing artists that aren't getting recognised. Where there are other types of practicing artists that get pedestaled and what's the difference and why is that happening? So you could see, unfortunately, a lot of feminist exhibitions excluding or excluding to a point. Where it's like we can have you in our performance program, but we won't have you on our walls. Or we'll have you on our walls but it will be made by a cis-gender artist representing a transgender body, and we'll call that inclusion.

Merren

Yes.

- Alex** So it's cookie crumbs or really to me, it also just seems like an intentional act of not including. When it's so strange, because it is a system that kind of really tries to leverage this sort of feminist ideology of like, let's give space, let's create space, let's generate it, but under certain conditions. And I think that's where the arts hasn't really done the work. And I think that's changing and it takes time. And I think one thing I've learned more than anything recently is just to be patient. You can't rush certain things.
- Katie** And I think the change is occurring much more quickly in smaller organisations and like ARIs and whatnot. It's larger institutions that will take time to catch up or catch up in a more meaningful way. And I guess that's part of the process. But obviously, there's huge differences in the money and resources and facilities available across those institutions, you know.
- Merren** As resources lessen too and, you know, things are going to be quite dire, I think, after this time with resources. You know, we are the only industry that hasn't been funded. And so they'll even it'll even be harder for some artists, in the future. I think that's why your show to me, I've only seen it online, Alex. I think that's why it struck such a chord with me. And it is something about that work that was so transitional, that had such pain, that had such loss. And to me, the fact that it was closed down and empty, you know, it only sort of reinforced that for me.
- Alex** Yeah. I'm constantly thinking about how much dust is on everything, not that I mind that, I kind of would leave the dust on it or something. But I also know that the rack that's got the clothes on it, it's not painted. So it's rusting, it's like oxidising and pulling the oxygen out of the gallery, in lockdown.
- Merren** Wonderful.
- Alex** Aging in this gorgeous little space.
- Merren** I mean, I wish I could articulate that, but even that is such a wonderful thing. You know, the artist is not present, the exhibition is not even present. You know, it is about absence and it is just sitting there changing. You know, for you to sort of suggest or work yourself around those words of being a non-artist. Unfortunately, the reverse has happened. You know, you are now a known pandemic artist. Your exhibition went on and crystallised something about this incredible time. You know, it's another layer, not just the dust layer but this extraordinary layer has been put onto it. It's going on. It's what you were talking about, the physics. What is it... the cat?
- Alex** Schroedinger's.

Merren Yeah, that's right. The dual universes.

Alex Yeah, I've made the joke about it being Schroedinger's exhibition. Like it's both good and bad. No one can see it. No one can know whether it's actually good. Or bad. To simplify it, the unknowableness to something that can't be seen.

Katie But it's wonderful that it's getting reviewed in that sense.

Merren, I wanted to ask you about Auslan because that's something we talked about a bit previously. I guess I was thinking about you learning Auslan and working with Deaf or hearing impaired people... And, you know, the fact that you have learned a new language to engage with this community. That says something to me about the work that is involved to holistically be able to work with another community. To speak their language. For them to be the expert and for you to be out of your comfort zone. I think that's an interesting shift.

Merren So Auslan, it is extremely difficult. I'd have to study it for years and years to be competent. I watch in wonder, those interpreters when I see the press conferences. But if I have to theorise what the basis of it was, it is that, as I've said, all my work was always about inclusion and access. But the fascination with Auslan is [also] about linguistics and my fascination with linguistics. To learn a visual, gestural language is just so profound. But it was really very, very challenging doing that Auslan course. We were always reminded that we had been given this great privilege and gift by our Deaf teachers. That they were actually sharing this very precious thing with us. And as well as doing language classes, we also did a lot on Deaf culture. There's all sorts of politics around that, too. There's a wonderful area I was getting into towards the end of my study, Deaf-hood. About not Deaf loss, not it being a loss, but Deaf gain. What are the powerful parts of being Deaf? And there's a whole lot of interesting theories about this. So you can imagine I took to that like a duck to water. That was a really, really positive line of thought. Then in the end, I sort of stopped and I hopefully, will go back and finish the diploma. I don't think I'll ever have the skills to be an interpreter. I would love to work in interpreting. But at the moment I'm sort of lucky I can work at the Deaf school as an emergency teacher. So that's a hugely steep learning curve, working with those kids. And also pre-COVID, I was liaising with the Deaf artists, that present programs of the NGV.

I am incredibly heartened that since COVID started all the Auslan courses across Australia are booked out. Everybody is learning Auslan, so perhaps I haven't answered that question. But I mean, I see one's life as stepping stones and intersecting stepping stones and, you know, so this for me was another step. I had always wanted to do Auslan. And then leaving work gave

me the time to do it. I can remember clearly, seeing these people on the train when I was five and saying to my mother, what are they doing? And it was sign language. So, you know, it took me 60, 50, whatever it was, 58 years to get around to it.

Katie Yeah, I definitely want to learn it.

Merren And I think everybody should. If it can be brought into primary schools, that's the other thing. There was a whole argument that with cochlear implants, Auslan would start falling away. But fortunately, that hasn't happened and the best parents perhaps are those that give their children the advantage of both.

Katie And I think that's beautiful, what you said, that it's the gestural language. I think each language has its own idiosyncrasies and a language that you make with your hands... That's so special.

Merren Well, I mean, you must see it. It is, again, to use that word, choreography. The best interpreters, there is such a variety between interpreters, too. Just in the same way as there's a variety between people who are born into Deaf families and Auslan is their first language, to those that learnt later in life. Their richness, in the same way, many of us have got different experiences of expression, or just the use of adjectives or whatever. And I can see that in interpreters, they're not exactly embroidering, they're just giving more information. You know, language is such a rich, layered, extraordinary thing. And what must be going on when they are interpreting from the words into both body and signs? I mean, it's incredible, really. Don't get me started on Auslan. I could just go on for weeks!

Katie No, it's great!

Merren And I, yes, of course, it is a disabilities area, but I have always tried to say people of all abilities. I don't sort of see it as... You know it's interesting even on various websites, they will say Deaf and disabled artists. And it's quite interesting. I think the politics around the language of disability too sort of comes into that.

Katie Yeah. I mean, I think that is something that has changed a lot as well in recent times.

Merren Yeah, absolutely.

Katie Alex, I wanted to ask you about your studies because you're studying

psychotherapy. Could you tell us a bit about your interest in that area and if it's informing your practice in any ways?

Alex I just wanted to say to Merren, I loved hearing about that.

Speaking about my studies. I have just loved studying psychotherapy. I live and I breathe it in a way that is... very hard to put into words. But it's something that I only used to feel with art and now I feel a passion for it. And it's just opened me up in a way that... I wish I could really express to you what it really means. But I think you can sort of feel how much I love it! I guess, when I think about that question and when I read it. I was just like, what art practice? I don't, you know, I'm not really actively practicing or thinking about... Like if someone asked me to do a show, I don't really know what I would put in it. That said, I think it would actually be very easy to practice and I think I am practising.

Katie You have a show up right now. [laughs]

Alex Yeah... But apart from this and a few interviews... there's no trajectory, even with the pandemic considered, there isn't much on my plate as far as an artist. So it's not really a consistently existing thing. It's a responsive thing that happens in the moment, but it isn't so much a practice. The other end of it is how much does my art come into my psychotherapeutic practice? You know I think more about that and... Oh God, how does it? Love of metaphor? I just love metaphors. I've always loved them. And it's just the building block of discussion. When you get to work on that with someone. I've been doing sessions of psychotherapy with other students, you get this phenomenon, where it actually is a visual process in my mind. Building something with someone and moving objects around and it's physical. So, to me almost, psychotherapy is a sculptural practice, within the brain or something along those lines. That's what it feels like when you're doing it. And ahh.. There's this mental flexibility in it that's just, it's just heaven or something.

That said, I actually love using all these really powerful tools about how we think, what's the process of thinking, how a system of thought solidifies into a way of thinking and how can we intervene on that. I think these are the very same principles of art. And I'd actually love to work... I've been racking my head how to make an artwork with the medium of the work being shame. It's such a powerful thing within ourselves and something we feel. And it's incredibly capable of really both horrible things, the way it can oppress us, the way we internalise shame. But we also do really amazing things with shame when we experience that moment of, oh, I fucked up and I feel so ashamed. That is the very building blocks of incredible things. And knowing

that actually we've all done this fucked up and we're like of gotta learn and then we do it. And it's one of the powerful motivators. Like how could that be... how can an artwork use shame in a positive way, to manifest change? Not sure that is possible.

Katie Well, shame has so much to do with speaking, as well. The deepest kind of shame is the things that you can't admit or the things that you can't say out loud. Like speaking about the causes of shame is... it has quite an instant effect in starting to relieve them... But I haven't studied psychotherapy.

Alex What I'm hearing is you're saying if you identify and verbalise what might be a shame, it gives a huge impact to a person.

Katie Or if you share what you believe to be shameful, that reduces it. I'm just paraphrasing from my own therapy sessions. [laughs]

Alex Sure. And I'm going on a big existential rollercoaster of does talking about shame reveal... I think, yeah, shame and grief can be interlaced as well. And both have the power of... we often don't even know we're experiencing an idea of grief or an idea, not an idea, a felt sense, of shame or grief and how even just putting it into words and manifesting it as an idea attached to a symptom like, 'I don't know why my backs so sore constantly?' And that there could be something I'm completely unaware of attached to that idea. And once you reveal those deep ideas that are just so embedded in us. Then, yea it can be quite radical to reveal.

Katie I think it's very interesting what you said about processes of working with a client, being like moving objects around, and that it does have this like, sculptural quality. Because my practice is sculptural as well and I feel very much like that. I feel that articulating a certain shape, that that can say something that you can't figure out how to say in language.

Alex Absolutely. I feel this unfortunate obsession with language.

Katie Same.

Alex Right. And it's interesting, people often in a therapeutic setting or any kind of setting, they often start apologising when they can't find words. Like there's a thing about that, where it's like, 'Oh, I'm sorry, I'm not very articulate or I don't really know what I'm saying'. And actually... I'm getting goosebumps talking about it. But that is actually the inception of kind of meaning - feeling, on an existential level I think it's the origin of meaning. Then we at some point get into our brains, like this silly little cognitive monkey that likes to think, then we

put words to it and think we know it. But what we're actually doing is putting language as a priority when actually I think the felt-ness of a feeling and even around a feeling or the expanse of what it is to be human is pre-lingual. And I think art is one point where it veers off and steers away from language or the function of language, I mean language can be an art. But like that's where we can sort of identify it. And you feel that on the other end, when studying psychotherapy, like, I recognise this place, this place is homey to me.

Merren Yes.

Alex Within Gendlin and focusing techniques of an emotion-focused therapy, it sort of gets away from the brain into the body and finds this space that instantly as an artist you're like this is home for me. That's why it feels like sculpture. And I think that's why my class has like four or five artists in it as well. There is a sisterhood between the two disciplines. So it feels so homely. If that answers your question?

Merren That is such a wonderful thing to hear.

Katie It seems like we all have this language fascination. I mean, I'm sure it's very common. It's one of the primary conditions of our existence...

Merren Sort of as the non-artist here. You know, why then has it been my life's passion? You know, it's this seeking exactly... of the things that are beyond words that can't always be articulated, that have to be pondered on and considered. I'm one of those people that say I can't really articulate what I mean. So I'm just going to remember just to feel... But, yes, metaphor. All of that is just so important, layering, metaphor, translation.

Katie When you were saying that idea of seeking, to me then it makes so much sense the work that you've done because it seems like you're casting a wide net to try and get these answers back. Instead of asking, you know, straight white men what they think about life. You have gone to work with people of all ages, people of all genders, people who've lived with neurodiversity and different abilities. I guess I've been thinking about this a lot recently, this idea of an accumulation rather than a clarity.

Merren Ahh, that's so true.

Katie Yeah. Rather than trying to have coherence and one formal answer to things, the solution might be, and it wouldn't be a solution, to have lots of contradictory responses because that's just more like what life is like.

- Merren** Mhm. Absolutely. I mean that's what I was trying to articulate, thinking if I could put my biography into one hundred words. Exactly what you were saying, that there is just this extraordinary... I think I talked about it last time, the joy of being this age. Yes, there is the sword of Damocles hanging over me, of limited time and bad health. But on the other hand, it's like these stepping stones, these intersecting circles, everything coming together. Just, you know, you can spend the rest of your life reading. You can spend the rest of your life having discussions like this. You know, I could pick Alex's brain for a fortnight about the incredible people. You must be reading and discussing the richness of knowledge, I suppose. That just goes on and on. We are blessed that we are passionately engaged in the world of ideas.
- Katie** And I think I'm going to come back to it again and say, if we want to create a Women's Art Register, then in order to create one that is honest to the world of women and non-binary people and gender diverse people, that that's going to require a lot of different responses from a lot of different people. Otherwise, it's a really partial view. And, you know, the fact that the registry is open access is one of the things that I think is so amazing about it. And I'm really interested in how that open access can manifest in a meaningful and genuine way.
- Merren** Yeah.
- Katie** I want to ask you my cheesy rounding off question! [laughs] What's been sustaining you personally during the pandemic? And if you have any suggestions for how we might sustain the arts community in the difficult years to come? Who wants to go first? [Laughs]
- Merren** Alex, wants to go first. [laughter]
- Alex** I'm just having that joke in my head of, like, frozen meat pies. [laughter] It's like such an accessible, easy meal that's comforting. No, I have no artistic context to sort of speak to about it. I think in a general sense, this time has been the most challenging in that it is forcing, or encouraging, maybe as a softer word to say, that it's encouraging us to go inwards. It's intolerable to be so still and to not be able to move and not to be relying on all the things we've relied on. And the only thing for me at least is to go inwards. Which is awful, is horrifying, is painful. [laughter] But in being still with a body that doesn't want to be, a body in pain, a body struggling. You know, nurturing it in a way of just being present. And I think that is the ethic of sustainability is... I don't know, what does that mean? Inward peace or something? Like it's cliché, but what that's taught me is patience. I think patience can be really radical. Right? And something that we're going to really need too. Because it's

going to be hard. It's definitely going to be really hard in a lot of ways, and it's never going to go back to the way it was, exactly. Hopefully, it can get better. But like, you know, the resilience that we're going to need, it's going to require that peacefulness that we're hopefully learning.

Merren It's interesting you say patience, there's just disappointment at not getting out there and then returning to self. I'm quite good at pottering and I have always been good. And of course, resilience doesn't it come from adaptability? Those with the strongest mental health, some of those, you know, can adapt to situations. 'Here, I'm sitting here, I don't have to worry about, you know, looking after my children while I am also working.' I think that I've been extremely lucky that I've been able to read so widely. And I'm just Zoom mad, I'm just always on webinars. I'm just discovering all these amazing things. And one positive that will come out of it in regards to access is that I think festivals and things will be having dual delivery now. And so people who are unable to attend events because of psychological, geographic or financial barriers, I think that that will be a big positive change in the arts, once things recover. I suppose one thing that sustains me is hope, you know, pure and simple, that things will be better.

Katie Maybe that's a nice note to leave it on. I want to thank you both so much for this conversation, it's been wonderful.

Alex Merren, I just want to thank you as well for, you know, just for getting to know you and understanding everything that you've shared. And I just sort of want to acknowledge the labour that has sort of, formed the foundation within Melbourne, the Melbourne that I enjoy so much, has been affected by you, over many years. So I just, I think that's important to acknowledge. And I just want to thank you for all your beautiful work, over many years.

Merren Oh, that is very moving.

Katie *This project has been supported by the City of Yarra. Thanks to Andrew Bennett for the music and sound production on these episodes. You can find a full pdf transcript and relevant links on the 'It Comes in Waves' page on the Women's Art Register website. Thank you for listening.*

Links

Alex's current show:

<https://tcbartinc.org.au/content/love-is-the-length-of-her-hair/>

<https://tcbartinc.org.au/content/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Alex-Cuffe-Love-is-the-Length-of-her-Hair-2nd-19th-July-2020.pdf>

[Artforum review](#)

[un Projects review](#)

[MeMO review](#)

Resources for those interested in Auslan:

[Seeing Voices by Oliver Sacks](#)

<https://www.melbournepolytechnic.edu.au/study/auslan/>

<https://www.facebook.com/magichandsauslan/>

[Can't See For Lookin education resource booklet](#)