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Admiring All We Accomplish

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In this podcast, Eliza Chandler interviews artist Alex Bulmer about her experience as a blind audience member of Deirdre Logue's exhibition *Admiring All We Accomplish* at the Tangled Art Gallery.

Alex: Well I'll start with the question I wanted to ask you on the way here. It was about the context of the work. The artist's statement surprised me. It surprised me because I was expecting it to give me an overall frame to contextualize the three pieces of work. For me it didn't do that, and I am assuming that was intentional. And I thought that was very interesting. It actually didn't make it, let's say, it didn't make it easier.

Eliza: Yeah.

Alex: You know what I mean?

Eliza: I do know what you mean. It's interesting because we talk a lot about that at Tangled: how to translate work.

Alex: Yeah.

Eliza: And if the intention of the work is not to be immediately understood, but instead to create sort of a state of suspended bafflement, or an invitation to be confused, or an invitation to be disoriented. How do we translate that into an accessible form? So, to translate the experience of bafflement might not be to explain what the show is about. But, on the other hand, we don't want

people to feel as though they're not tapped into the right languages, or the right discourses, or the right histories.

Alex: Yeah.

Eliza: So that people don't think that they are baffled because they're not the intended audiences.

Alex: Yes. It's a really important question and I think that question will probably continue to be difficult to answer for a long time. Because it did strike me, with all three pieces I felt a kinesthetic familiarity in terms of my engagement with all three pieces. I felt my stomach clench; I was holding my breath; my shoulders were kind of pinching; I was confused. And that's a familiar state of being for me. So it felt very familiar, and I really liked it for that. That exhibit could have been called 'Sight Loss.' The work demanded a relationship with the body because of how sensory stimulating it was. I thought the translations [vibrating extensions] that David [Bobier] made- the pillows and the vibrations- I think were a key feature in that exhibit.

Eliza: I think the work is interesting because it translates an experience of embodied difference in a way that isn't achieved by, perhaps, taking a photograph.

Alex: Yeah.

Eliza: I think the extensions that David created- the pillows around the plinth- that's not just about accessibility. We [Tangled] commissioned those extensions to make the show accessible, but what they in fact did, was they created a new way to feel how Deirdre experiences the world. If the intent of the work, which I think it is, is not translating in the sense that we know how it feels to be in her body, but to give us a sense of a different kind of way of experiencing the world. I don't think this is achieved as well when we just watch the videos with our eyes and

hear the videos with our ears. I think that anxiety of having your back clench up, your shoulders clench when she's biting on the balloon and eventually it pops; for me I wouldn't have experienced that to nearly as great affect if there wasn't for that vibrating thing we that were sitting on.

Alex: That's interesting, you know, because I can't compare [my experience to the] experience of watching it and comparing it that way. From the audio description and listening to that awful sound of the rubber going back and forth across the teeth… it's so unnerving. It's interesting because the description actually tells you before it happens that the balloon will burst.

Eliza: Oh really?

Alex: Yes. Now again, that's a timing thing. The descriptions of the pieces were not timed with the actual pieces themselves. I was getting almost a preview of what was going to happen. Again, if that was an artistic choice, then that's an interesting artistic choice. But I have a feeling it probably wasn't an artistic choice.

Eliza: It was probably clumsiness.

Alex: [Laughs]. Yes I think so. I think it was clumsiness.

Eliza: Yeah.

Alex: So, you know, I think I have to contextualize my experience being one that was given a preview. I knew what was going to happen in each piece before it actually happened. And certainly in the case of that piece, I think that would have been an excellent artistic decision. Because to tell you, the viewer or the person experiencing it, the listener, that a balloon is going to pop in a woman's face; that instantly made me anxious.

Eliza: And not only pop, but pop because she's biting it.

Alex: Right, okay, yeah. Yeah. I think it worked for that particular video. The other two installations I would have wanted the description while it was unfolding. But that aside, getting back to the question about the *Rubber Talk*… the vibrations, I thought, demanded that I remain connected to my body while I was experiencing something I knew was on screen. So when I, as a non-sighted person, when I am watching television or when I'm at a video installation that's being described, I am imagining the images on a screen. I'm not just sort of randomly thinking of them in my head. I'm actually imagining that experience of watching a screen with images. And what the vibrations did for me was, I wasn't just focusing on what was out there on a screen, I was actually very much aware of what was going on in my body. And I think was really cool. That's the one where I really felt this is very much how I feel in my own body when I just wander around the city. If I hadn't known anything about the artist, I would have assumed this was possibly a blind artist; an artist who was losing their sight. It had some uncanny connections to the very first piece of video art I made when I was first losing my sight. And what my work didn't have was that sensory, tactile, vibration element to it. And if it had, I think it would have been just such a fuller experience. But yeah, it really could have been about sight loss. But you know, the images were coming and going. That's the other thing I noticed about her work. You couldn't hang on— she didn't allow the viewer— to hang on to anything. And also her images, like in *Baby Lint Brush*, the images just would appear and then you'd be on to a different image. Then it would a pillow, and then a lint brush, then it would be a woman lying down, then there was the foot. It was like nothing lasted very long. So, there was this kind of sense that [deep inhale] that again, to me, that's disability. That's an experience of disability.

Alex: There is something very particular in the aesthetic about how the control over the art that you're making is transcending on some level… that vulnerability and that lack of control. It's this momentary experience of controlling the uncontrollable.

Eliza: Yeah, yeah.

Alex: And it's so elusive; it's so temporary. But, that sense that for this small moment in time, you can use the camera to contain what is otherwise uncontainable. And I really felt that in that work, I really did. I think the one that really spoke to me in that sense was *Big Agnes*. There's something so controlled and comforting about a tent, but everything that was being perceived outside of that tent was chaos. So yeah, I do relate to this idea of controlled and uncontrollable. Getting back to the original question: if you don't have that lived experience, does work like this make any sense? And is that okay if it doesn't? Again, back to the bafflement.

Eliza: This is my interpretation of Deirdre's work. I have spoken to her about it a lot. She's always very interested to hear how I relate to the work and how I see the crip aesthetic in the midst of her queer aesthetic. As you know, she's the most generous person in the world, but she's not going to say, "Yes you've got it. That's exactly my experience of the world and my intention for the artwork." So, I don't know how others respond. I don't think the success of the show lies within somebody understanding that as a moment of controlled vulnerability. If you haven't had that experience as one of your own, then perhaps you don't get that. Perhaps that doesn't come through in the work. Because, as you say, it's certainly not framed in that way in the artist statement. The artist statement is quite technical and talks about how Deirdre and David Bobier worked together to create these vibratactile videos. But it's not giving you any insight. So you're left baffled. The thing that I love about disability art, and seeing your plays and watching

you in the crip cabaret about this time last year, is that in order to 'get the work,' you have to understand something about disability. There is some sort of 'insider knowledge' that is going on.

I think that the particular experience of going into art galleries, [to think]: 'Will they have thought of me before I arrive.'

Alex: I think going into the Tangled Gallery also has a totally unique tone because I walk into that gallery knowing that I have been imagined. I walk into that gallery feeling invited, included, and welcome. I don't walk into any art gallery, or hardly any other cultural space, with that. So, that's interesting. There's a comfort that is offered in that gallery that I don't get [anywhere else]. Let's just imagine that exhibition not in the Tangled Art Gallery.

Eliza: Well, it was in two other galleries. And they didn't have audio description. They didn't have vibrating extensions.

Alex: Oh wow. I honestly can't imagine that work without those two elements.

Eliza: Me neither. I really can't. And Deirdre has said she won't show that work again without those two components.

Alex: That's brilliant. Those two components… they don't clarify the work; they enhance the work; they deepen the work; they speak to the work. It's different than clarifying it. And it's not a translation either. I didn't feel like it was being translated. That's not what it felt like. It felt like there were three different parts to the work: the work; the language associated describing the work; and the vibrations inspired by the work.

Eliza: Did you like the artist giving you the audio descriptions?

Alex: Totally.

Eliza: And you know her, so it's likely a different experience; it's a familiar voice. But I really liked that too.

Alex: I love it. It crossed my mind at one point, I thought, "This is Deirdre's voice." And the tone of her voice was very grounded, you know, it wasn't emotive. And I thought, 'would somebody who wasn't the artist…?' Well, they would've had a different tone of voice. It made it more authentic.

Eliza: Amanda Cachia, who's a disability curator in the States, she talks about the ideal would be that you would have several different audio descriptions: one written by an audio describer; one written by a blind person; one written by the artist; one written by the curator; one written by a kid; to sort of mess up the idea that there is only one way to describe or translate a video or a visual work into an aural experience.

Alex: That's interesting. I'm of two minds. I like that idea because if it was a translation, if the audio description was intended to be purely a translation of the work so that I, a non-sighted person, would have the best opportunity to engage with the work; therefore, let's give lots of angles and perspectives on the work. However, in this case, I don't think I would've wanted that. I only wanted Deirdre, because, like I say, it didn't feel like a translation, but as part of the artist's work itself. By giving her that voice and isolating it more as her voice and not multiple voices, it became part of the artist's work.

Alex: This whole idea of 'Is the experience the most enriched by multiple describers?' or, 'Is the experience the most enriched by the artist's input into the description.' They just seem like two

different things to me. One seems to be more about the art and the artistic expression and the other seems like a translation.

Eliza: I have also heard blind artist's friends say that they're not really interested in work that's not intended for a non-visual audience. The experience of having a visual work translated into an aural description is not an experience that they're interested in because, as they say they're sort of a secondary audience; it's not intended for them. They're only interested in work that is tactile, or the primary way to engage that work not being through sight but being through another experience. What do you think about that? Do you think that there is something creatively exciting about listening to an audio description in a gallery? Or should it always be supplemented by another way of experiencing the work; through touch, vibration, or performance?

Alex: I think it depends on the work itself. I'm not convinced that all visual art will maintain its integrity with a tactile experience. I enjoy having tactile and description, I do. It certainly gives more insight to the piece. But if the piece is about alienation or about distancing yourself from the world, touching something is an incredibly intimate experience, so that might actually be totally counter to what the piece of art is trying to communicate. That's why I was pondering this idea of multiple voices, as well. Because 'multiple voices' is communicating something. I think every piece of art, in my mind, has its own journey towards the audiences that will come and engage with it. Every piece of art requires a different journey to that audience. So, yeah, I think it would depend on the art itself. But in this case, I can't imagine that work without those added elements. If she ever does it again, I would love to really think more about how the language element of the piece, which we are calling audio description, works more in terms of the timing

of it. Like I said, I love the fact that I knew the balloon was going to break ahead of time. But in the other two pieces, I really wanted them timed.

Eliza: And I'm always interested in how audio description can be something to creatively engage with unto itself. I don't think that an audio description can, with entire accuracy, translate how I experience something visually. We've talked about that before. So the only possibility is that it becomes something new. When it becomes something new, then we can think about not having a head set, which I fumble around with to get the timing right. But, we actually build it into the experience into the show so that you're not experiencing the show without audio description.

Alex: …especially for a piece of work like this. It needed to be embedded. I know that wasn't Deirdre's intention in the beginning, but, like you say, she doesn't want to do it again without it. It so wants to be embedded in the art itself as part of the artist's consciousness. As part of the artistic expression. To me, it isn't a translation of this work; it is the work itself. By going to the desk and picking it up and fumbling around, it unfortunately doesn't actually feel like the work itself, but I think it *is* the work itself. Audio description is often considered giving access, but access in itself suggests that something exists first. If you think about descriptive language more as part of the artistic experience, I think that will change the way blind people engage with visual art. It would be a much better experience. I would agree that there are simply some things that just— to have them described… I saw a circus performance recently, and it's just not the same when somebody says, 'He's juggling three balls.' [Laughs]. Or, you know, 'He's juggling three pins.' You're like, 'uhhhh?,' right? But, there could be, there are better ways of making that visual experience engaging for a non-sighted audience. And I don't think that words, in that particular case, are the way to do it. And maybe the other issue too is that language is a code that

we all agree to, whereas a video installation or visual art, is not so much of a tight code. Language tends to pin things down.

Eliza: Yes, it really does. And it can give us a false sense of translation.

Alex: Yeah, which is probably why this idea of five different describers is considered an interesting approach.

Eliza: But, you know, there's something, too, about the experience of going into a gallery as being one that's social and interactive and celebratory, especially at an opening. It's flexible. You start experiencing work; you get interrupted by a conversation; you go back to that. And, I don't know that that experience is properly translated when I'm giving you a headset and I'm fumbling around and we have to move quickly so we don't miss the beginning. And, if it [audio description] was built into the show, as you're suggesting, than that flexibility and social interaction would be possible.

Alex: I can't imagine trying to experience that show with other people in the room interrupting me. It just wouldn't happen. In fact, I have to confess, I so wanted to come to the opening because I just adore Deirdre. But I decided not to. Because I was concerned that it would be like a half-baked experience. I can't bear having conversations with artists who I so respect without properly being able to talk about their work. And, so I decided not to come … and then you came along, which was great! So no, it does not feel like it could be a social experience. However, if I was to go over to the piece and put on headphones that are connected into the screens, you know, and coming on as soon as the screens come on, then it would be much more possible for me to interact. Or, if the language was simply heard by everybody, in which case then everybody would be getting that experience.

Eliza: That's great. But not everyone.

Alex: Of course not. Because not everyone can hear it!

Eliza: Any final thoughts about that show? Or anything we've been talking about at all?

Alex: Well I feel inspired. I admire this kind of work. In theatre, you know, I think so often we spend so much time trying to make sure that it makes sense to the audience. I'm so bored of that, you know, I really am. Maybe bored isn't the right word, it just doesn't speak to my experience of life. I've been confused about my own area of expertise because it's not expressing my life experience. I'm looking— I'm searching— for a new kind of art form or art expression that is right for me. 'Right' doesn't seem like the right word. Definitely— theatre is not doing it for me. And seeing that show made me feel that there is an artistic expression, there are ways that can express the sorts of ideas I have. And. so for that, -- I just feel really inspired, so thank you.