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In the End Times

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IN THE END TIMES

The background features a complex abstract design composed of several overlapping geometric shapes. A large, irregular black shape dominates the center, with a thin orange border. This black shape is set against a solid orange background. The overall composition is dynamic and modern.

Jacqueline
Donachie

Artlink

From the beginning of March 2020 through to the present we have asked different artists and thinkers to respond to issues that were being unearthed as Covid-19 took its toll on our communities. Each writer was asked to respond to a simple brief that in some way related to their lived experience, providing the opportunity to open up these issues, to better understand what we could and should have in common.

A couple of years ago I made a sculpture called *In the End Times*; the title (from a Kate Tempest poem) feels very apt. It is heavy, and very big (over 6m long x 2.5m wide), made from thin sheets of steel durbar fitted over a square-bar frame, with a wide flat surface that tails off into a long, hinged ramp. The checker plate surface is powder coated a dark matt, velvety grey, unreflective, non-slip.

In the End Times clangs when someone moves across it - the steel sheeting snaps at the gaps in the framework below making the whole thing judder. Everyone in the gallery jumps, terrified it is broken. But the steel, though thin, is strong; the surface just flexes when the weight of a person stands on a section between the supports underneath, then pings back.

It has become a useful descriptor for now. A sturdy frame split into parts that one person can just about manage, yet when joined make a framework that can support heavy steel sheets that need at least two strong carriers to lift each one. It's a bastard to install but once assembled lies like a stealth submarine, low on the floor. Dark, heavy, hard to move. The work to me has always been about the weight of responsibility felt by carers – the ever-present risk of everything collapsing, that ramp slamming down, breaking fingers; the difficulty to move it, the darkness underneath... all combined in the sleek simple lines of art that my aesthetic head craves.

I have talked about this piece with the writer Melanie Reid, whose remarkable book *The World I Fell Out Of* charts a year of rehabilitation following the riding accident in which she broke her neck¹. The book has an incredible photograph of her in the spinal unit, six feet of Mel suspended in a

contraption to support her to stand upright and walk. Complicated machinery holding every part of her, hoist, handrails, robotic leg irons - the framework of movement and support that her own broken systems had blocked. It is both cyborg and utterly base mechanical, resembling a primitive contraption my teenage son might draw or something I would try to make in aluminium and leatherette - in fact it actually does resemble parts of things I made and drew a few years ago, in an invented hoist series called *Weight*.

But that framework – a Lokomat – is *the* most high-tech of devices, costing more than a Ferrari. It is unimaginably sophisticated, driven by highly advanced computer systems that understand and connect the body's moving parts. Thinking of it in relation to artworks I made in the studio would seem trite from Mel's perspective, but that incredible amount of tech just to propel a woman is an image I revisit constantly, though I feel ashamed that it makes me think of Rebecca Horn as much as it does Melanie Reid.

¹ Melanie Reid, *The World I Fell Out Of*, Fourth Estate 2019. p139

TABLE

Though the intention is welcoming, mostly, it is almost inevitable that I make things that reference support. You can sit on my sculptures, lean in on them; they will take your weight. Sometimes this invitation elicits 'deliberate and maverick' behaviours; to share a drink and a problem with a stranger, stretch out on a warm surface outdoors, at night. They are necessary in the moment, but unnecessary in their sculpture-ness, they are not actual chairs or bars or handrails or temples or analysis. Don't be stupid: these are sculptures.

I return often to the in-betweens, as Hannah Arendt describes them; those things that both connect and separate us in the world, 'as a table is located between those who sit around it' – through compulsion, necessity, need. Our buildings, our families, our communities. Each require a structure of some kind – to hold, elevate, support and manage. A world of things so dear to me that are now closed – civic spaces, public libraries, crowded bars, stadiums, house parties, dance floors; things that have informed my art practice over many years and they are not accidental. These are things that require, somewhere, a solid support to both enable them to rise and stop them collapsing. That this structure then offers the thrill of encounters, of social engagement, of dancing, singing, is part of the beauty of their public-ness, the potential is always there for them to be used by others.

And then this all happened. The sudden shift of lockdown forced us all to confront a much smaller world of things, in a much smaller space, and many of the structures we recognise shrank with that shift. Worlds still connected – this time literally through a kitchen table laptop portal, but with no separation from work to home, domestic to professional, personal to public. We became inhabitants of a virtual world, light and airy and everywhere, a world that very

quickly crowded into a space at the table offering all the culture one could consume, virtually – a vast, hastily prepared feast to gorge on, but with no walking in between, no pub to continue the debate, no train journey home to process conversations and altercations, and no distance between the international forum on placemaking and the calls for dinner from your kids. I couldn't cope with the lack of borders on top of family responsibilities; I love working as it takes me away from all of that, and so looking at a laptop for cultural stimulation was too invasive within a tense domestic situation.

What all this has emphasised is that there are multiple support systems that enable us to participate in culture, and not all of them are obvious. There is a flight of faith required in so much of what we can both give and gain from the arts, and the infrastructure holding everything up is not solid, or singular, or always visible; it is like Peter Pan's pantomime strings – a theatrical device offering magic and wonder but when the strings break, or a knot loosens, Peter comes crashing down.

TRAILER

The structure that absorbs me as I write is a trailer-tent in the garden, rain battering off the roof, plastic windows billowing, my new office and studio repurposed from an artwork (*The Temple of Jackie*) that was once a holiday home². An intriguing cantilever structure that is the talk of our street now that it is assembled. Instantly this puts me in the privilege box of lockdown artist ergonomics; I have access to outdoor space. I am also fortunate that my art practice accommodates a love of folding vehicles that can be re-used as office space in a time of global pandemic, and, although staring at a bed in this tiny cabin, I am not working in my bedroom.

It's not been a productive time in this trailer though, or at my kitchen table – unless preparing 15 plates of food a day count. At a time when I would have just completed a substantial new commission for Glasgow International Festival of Visual Art, and be working on another for Folkestone Triennial, my lockdown story has had zero jigsaws and a very low art-podcast consumption rate.

In saying that I have supported seven shielding dependants spread across the central belt, keeping them loosely in touch with the outside world when care services abruptly stopped. I have stepped in where Asda failed to deliver and can connect anyone over 80 to Zoom via a kitchen window. None of these are skills I ever wish to use again, and at a very personal level therein lies my greatest fear: that I am expected to continue. These services seem so mundane but are essential for maintaining a most basic quality of life; in

² *Temple of Jackie*, 2011/ 2017; adapted trailer tent jacqueline-donachie.co.uk/project/righthereamongthem

Jacqueline Donachie: Right Here Among Them, Fruitmarket Gallery 2017, p192.

the pandemic lockdown not all of us could do everything as usual, there were numerous restrictions, but think of how that would be if you couldn't cut your own nails, or carry in bags of shopping left on your doorstep, or required a taxi to get to the corner shop or pharmacy? If your muscles need weekly physiotherapy to stop them atrophying, but you get a comforting phone call instead of a massage, and the council furloughs the chap who was coming to put handrails up so that you could shower in your own home. How do you fill a day when you can't go out without help but live alone, can't read and have limited physical mobility? When the highlight of your week is to sing *Bohemian Rhapsody* at the community centre in your Thursday karaoke group but that's been stopped too?

I fear that the essential care structures that ended so abruptly three months ago for my family and so many like them will never come back and that a new structure of hair-cuts, nail cuts, shopping and grass cuts will be the tin lid on what was an art and academic career for which I have worked extremely hard.

And as we slowly move out of lockdown, I think that should be a fear widely held. Not that all of you will have to provide haircuts and karaoke to adults with learning difficulties, but that the expectations of what artists need - that they force time for amidst so many other demands - will stay relegated to the back burner and never return. That essential public services, those things that quietly keep families with dependents rolling along over the long term, that take forever to put in place through benefit applications and social work meetings, that give an opportunity for children or adults to thrive whatever

their needs and not just stagnate, will be replaced by short term panic funds that only recognise immediate need and not long-term growth. That school and childcare won't need stepped up as everyone has managed magnificently without it, that kitchens or leaky trailers are perfectly good workspaces, that everyone can shop local or online and cycle everywhere, and that artists don't need to earn proper fees because we can all exist on small stuff sold online.

And I fear this particularly for women who work in the arts, who rely on multiple structures of care the most and who will likely be hit the hardest. And this hit is not just financial, though that is critical - the freelance furlough scheme has benefitted healthy tax returns, those most likely to show steady art market sales, and this is a structure where it is recognised that women already lag behind³. The economic structure that maintains so many artists is not a single financial thread – it is a tangled macramé frame of a thing, as often income is a blend of teaching, sales, fees (some PAYE, some not), topped up with part time jobs and tax credits, supported by state funded nurseries and helpful grandparents – a scaffold of props carefully assembled. And it is so precarious, a fine balance of money and time brought together to carve out a small amount of creative space. Destabilise that structure and collapse is inevitable, with creative time (and therefore good creative output) buried at the bottom of the pile.

³ *Representation of Female Artists in Britain*, Research papers 2 – 4, (2016 – 2018), Dr Kate McMillan, Freelands Foundation, London.

freelandsfoundation.co.uk/research-and-publications/annual-report-representation-of-female-artists-in-britain

LOAD

The assumption of what a thing is, and what load it can take, preoccupies me. Making it, looking at it, holding it. Sculptures that look like they can take your weight but maybe sometimes they cannot. Sculptures that are a bit dangerous. When gallery staff really mean it when they say, in panic, “d o n o t s t a n d o n t h a t. It’s not solid! It will break!”

Of course it will. These are sculptures.

The care services that support my family are similar to these sculptures and bridges and walking machines. Individually they don’t seem much, but when bolted together they provide essential quotidian support for life to just about stay upright; for cleaners to clean, supermarkets to deliver, for personal care services (the lovely Fiona) to wash and blow dry a young woman’s hair, for Zoe to change the beds and Tam to drive a taxi.

Beyond domestic, a critical element of this support structure is the provision of regular social activity that facilitates essential independence for adults with complex needs and enables them to stay socially connected; adults who live with ageing parents who themselves are coping less well, or adults who live alone faced with days seeing no-one. In so many cases this is provided by and through art in its many forms. A museum to visit, workshop to attend, a matinee performance at a local theatre. The interconnectedness of things is unavoidable, but only noticeable when key parts fail, or disappear; these are the structural in-betweens without which things collapse – some dramatically, more that quietly waste away. Critical aspects of our society now have their doors closed, maybe to reopen but maybe not. And if they do open, under what circumstances?

Some of the sculptures I make aren't that strong in themselves. Where colourful aluminium tubing spans two points, the strength is in the wedged connection to a wall or pillar, a dependency on architecture as a framework for a rigid line drawn through a space, like those brilliant Bill Bollinger works from the 1970s.⁴ A simplified demonstration of the dependant technology that makes a bridge stay up. Engineers, builders, plumbers – they get structure. Artists who make stuff, gallery managers, art handlers, people who can work a hoist, fold a buggy, lift a toddler, turn a bedridden gentleman – they get it too. It can be hard, there are rules to learn, sometimes exams and certificates - but without dependant technology everything breaks, falls down. People get hurt and we lose trust.

And it is trust more than anything that has been battered by this virus.

The word is that a local care home I cycle by regularly had 33 deaths from Covid-19 in a couple of weeks. Thirty-three elderly people dead from a community of 100. That is the grandparent of every single child in a primary school class, a parent of every player across three professional football teams; a shocking statistic. How can care workers cope with the weight of that loss? Who is evaluating their trauma and that of families? Where is the outrage at this?

Think of a care home as a sculpture. A key part of the social infrastructure that maintains our society, made by an artist (this is not a big leap). Instead of a government why don't we have some gallery attendants in charge,

⁴*Nice Style*, powder coated aluminium tubing, 2016 (collection of Glasgow Museums) and *Walk With Me*, powder coated aluminium tubing, 2017.

testing out the crowd, knowing when the kid is just having fun but the big heavy guy will bend it, keeping watch over something that THEY KNOW and they understand because they get the structure of how it is made and they CARE about it. With a manager who, when it gets very busy at the opening and stakes are raised, puts someone extra on guard just to care for one single piece that is too fragile to stand up to those numbers. They are the marker, protecting the gentle work (the sheet on the floor, the chalk, dust or gesture at risk of destruction by an enthusiastic but slightly tipsy art crowd). The care of fragile objects versus the care of fragile humans, what an awful equation... now think of the value that is attributed to both. Why is the attendant nervous at the crowd? What is at stake? A lot, in terms of monetary value, which is why all risks are carefully assessed. And there is love for the work, and respect for the place it holds in the structure of the (art)world that justifies the CARE, but recognition that love isn't going to protect it from a crowded room. Why couldn't we use this model of structural integrity to look after our loved ones?

I wonder at art providing the words and imagery to interpret this time. A time when art has never felt further away in the last few months of shoring up a care system that stopped abruptly on 23rd March and has yet to fully restart. It drags me back, giving words and metaphors to describe a situation I am struggling with. It arms me. Just as the three white plinths used in the film *Pose Work for Sisters*, in an image borrowed from Bruce McLean, gave me the structure to describe a loss of physical movement in my sister that I could not confront – particularly not with her – art has always given me the physical simplicity to describe complicated emotions.⁵

Our world stands still in fear that it is over, with hope for better times. As we start to move forwards, slowly, I hope we can remember these simple metaphors and try just that bit harder to consider, and value, what is holding us up. As the artist Hyto Steyerl says, we need less love and more infrastructure:

‘An economy based on love ends up being an economy of exhaustion – after all, love is utterly exhausting – of deregulation, extraction and lawlessness. All is fair in love and war. It doesn’t mean that love isn’t true or passionate, but just that love is usually uneven, utterly unfair and asymmetric, just as capital tends to be distributed nowadays. It would be great to have a little less love, a little more infrastructure.’⁶

⁵ *Pose Work for Sisters*, 2016. Video, 10 minutes, no audio.

(Collection Glasgow Museums and Arts Council Great Britain)

jacquelineonachie.co.uk/project/poseworkforsisters

Jacqueline Donachie: Right Here Among Them, Fruitmarket Gallery 2017, Pg 238.

⁶ Hito Steyerl, *Politics of Post-Representation*, DIS Magazine, dismagazine.com

Artlink

Established in 1984, Artlink is an arts and disability organisation. We believe participation in the arts has an important role to play in realising personal and social change.

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