

## Reflections on one year of fellowship by Emily Nicholl – Part 1



*Waves slowly ripple onto a sandy beach under a grey blue cloudy sky. It's probably cold out. One wave crashes slightly more than the others, its white foam creating spray and movement.*

*I sit as I have done many times in an evening surrounded by the voice of crows and the movement of trees in my peripheral vision to the side of the computer screen. The wind blows through waves along the branches, the crows making their communal decision of where to rest that night, neighbours bins banging down the steps, a fading light making tracks across the hill. Aware of the soundtrack and the visual cues which have become part of a daily experience of my small landscape this past year. A small boxy flat next to a park, noisy close neighbours, the lives of the others, views and green space. I have tracked the sunlight as it moves and disappears along the wall from spring to winter to summer. The kind of view which tells us what time of year it is, the kind of light which tells us what time of day it is. I wrote in the first months of the lockdown 'We live in a sea of green. A submarine in the sky'.*

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This fellowship has been a time of thinking, considering, listening, learning, decluttering, resisting, unpicking, challenging, beginning, responding.

When I came to the research, it was not expected that we find ourselves in the pandemic environment as we have done. My initial thoughts around our varying relationships to landscape and finding something which might border gardening with outdoor education, adventure sports with live performance, or something in between which considers what a theatrical experience could bring versus simply spending time outdoors, seemed throughout the year ever more relevant. As the experience of the pandemic shone such a bright light on inequity in general, it emphasised the importance of access to green space or land, whilst highlighting the specific inequities of accessing, living near to, having ownership of or having a sense of belonging to that green space.

When I came to the fellowship, it was with the desire to learn about working in a way which was inclusive, would consider a whole variety of ways people experience the world, would be a making process which started by putting the audience at its heart. I also wanted to consider the political for young audiences, perhaps nudging where this boundary lies whilst investigating what is appropriate.

I'm discovering that sensory work seems to perhaps intrinsically be political, whilst also being purely experiential and cultural. In a way it's not allowed to be apolitical, is it? It centres access, putting it at the beginning of a process and aims to dismantle assumptions or hierarchies. It's about collaborating as, with and centring disabled artists, communities and people. It listens to 'nothing about us, without us' and uses the social model of disability developed by disabled people which recognises that it's the barriers in society which are disabling, from physical barriers to disabling attitudes or expectations. It collaborates, responds and is in constant dialogue. Within this political work, are there ways in which to include questions of more political nature on other topics which are relevant to this audience of young people?

As things have shifted and changed multiple times I have been extremely aware of the impact this time will have had and still be having on disabled young people and on their families, teachers, schools, carers. We go through this time in a way which seems to place the economy before people, which expects a lot without offering support, which has widened the gap so brightly between those comfortable and those who are faced with more hardship. This year has forced many to slow down, but others have been forced to keep going in extremely difficult circumstances, in a variety of situations.

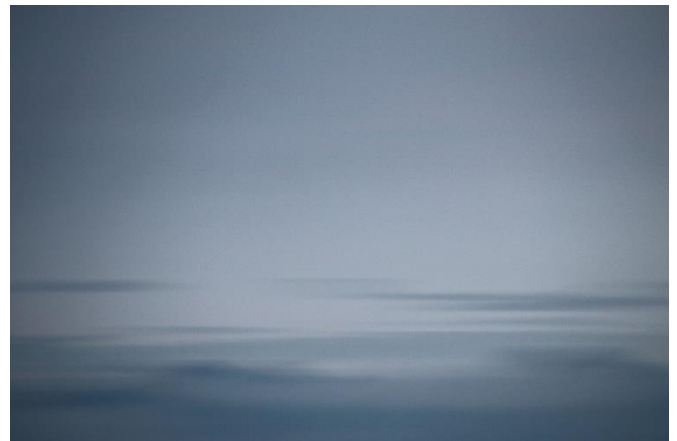
Time given to volunteering, to community, to support, to conversation, to learning. To worrying, to hoping, to panicking, to disappointment that we are not in fact revolutionising the way we are with each other in society, and that the powers of elitism and the colonial capitalist state are very much still alive.

Time given to a strange sometimes uncomfortable permission to talk about and also simultaneously realise, how much my own history of chronic illness has impacted my identity and experiences in work and life. I don't think I fully was even aware, until last year. I cried in acknowledgement of experience whilst reading articles written by chronically ill people and I have not said it out loud very often. With a relationship to a body which wildly fluctuates between extremely able bodied or ill, this year has also been about destabilising the ableism I hold, aimed at others and at myself. This includes unpicking my own privilege or positionality within this experience alongside making work for a young disabled audience when I do not identify as disabled and nor do I have children.

These thoughts and the experience from/of the pandemic have run so much alongside this research period that it is hard to unpick what is what sometimes. It feels even more important that the learning gained from this fellowship expand in to other parts of my daily life, artistic practice, and processes, behaviours and priorities. I continued over this year, as so many have, to consider the overlapping roles of artist, citizen, neighbour, friend. Sometimes wondering whether the research for this fellowship was actually as much about changing my own perspectives and growing into the 'how' of a practice, as it was working towards live performance.



*At dusk and under a grey blue light, the tips of faraway mountains are softened by wisps of mist and cloud*

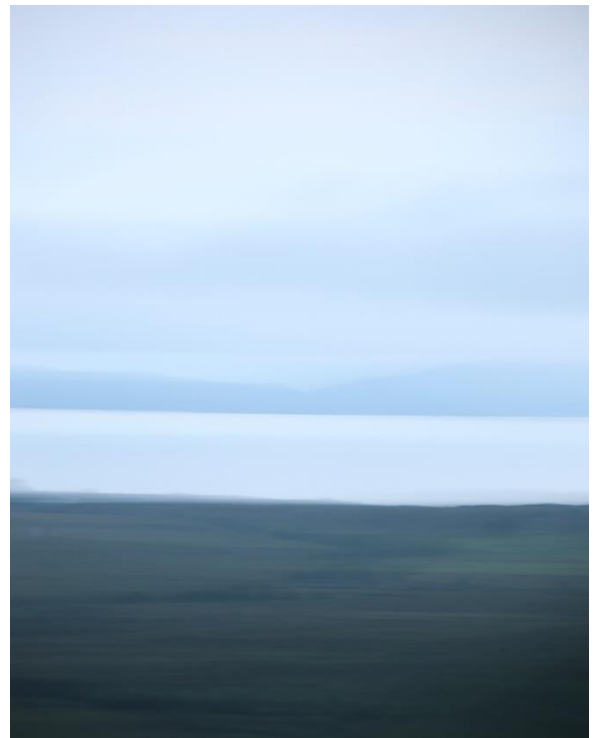


*The same image, but the photograph has been taken with purposeful movement. Clouds and edges are blurring with a sense of movement from right to left. Wispy clouds whizz*

Research for the seed idea for performance I came to the fellowship with, has moved between writing, dancing, filming the wind in landscapes, photography, conversations, reading, listening, walking, moving, aiming to consider a wide and diverse range of thought around our varying relationships to landscape, ecology or the natural world from the political to the sensory and all that is overlapping. I also aimed to disrupt hierarchies, in many senses of the word, of the senses and of 'accepted' behaviours or movements. Laying the vertical onto its side. Laying down with it, at its different parts. Seeing where we grow and what we grow from, what we must tend, where we must listen and where we must lead. Learning from those who do this already. Questioning things like working from the audio/hearing/sound first to create show/visuals/choreography, rather than visuals first and audio describe after? Wondering what else makes choreographies other than creating for visual interest in performance? A second blog will explain these reflections more.



*A close up image of brown grass poking through snow and frost taken from close to the ground. The grass is lit by the sun and it and the snow sparkles. In the distance more grass continues off into the distance.*



*This image has been taken with purposeful movement in the camera. It looks like a landscape blurring by out of a fast window and all edges are soft. The lower half is off green fields, then sea, then mountainous islands in the background under a white blue sky at dusk.*

## Reflections on one year of fellowship by Emily Nicholl – Part 2

We have been able to spend time in workshops with the wonderful play worker, artist and consultant Max Alexander. Max's 'A Playful Manifesto' brings such beautiful observations to the meaning and practice of play. His generous words give radical permission to play and to fail with compassion, joy and the permission to value others and ourselves. Looking sideways around things, catching ourselves by surprise, observing ourselves through thought or feeling, resisting 'achievement' as what we validate ourselves with. His words remind me of the practice of circus artists as they catch themselves or the audience by surprise and find ways to express the obsessive beauty they find in an object or movement through play, risk and failure.

*"You can't fail at play. We need space in our lives for things we can't fail at, things we can't judge ourselves on." Max Alexander.*

When speaking with Ellie Griffiths of Oily Cart, her self-awareness which centres another experience is inspiring. The importance of and process with which one can question your own positionality seems something tangible to observe and learn from her work and the way she talks about it. Through Oily Cart's use of the social model of disability, their work and process allows for a removal of barriers and a centring of the person in order to offer relevant, responsive and positive theatrical experiences. The political nature of their work raises the importance of providing shared cultural experiences for disabled young people and families. When we are so separated by society between disabled and non-disabled communities, the importance also of shared experiences and resisting that separation is highlighted by aiming to offer more visibility to disabled audience and artist led work in theatrical spaces, whilst also remaining true to what feels comfortable for this audience with their new work to be enjoyed at home made during the pandemic. This work is as inspiring as any others of theirs. Beautiful, thoughtful care packages of curated experiences, and fascinating sensory film 'Something Love' which resonated greatly.

As the pandemic also shines a light on what and who theatres are for, we ask what could offer a greater sense of belonging to these spaces for those chronically made to feel uncomfortable. When so much is about a shared experience, I've always preferred circles for performing in or watching from, but I find myself questioning even more so of late, what's enjoyable about straight on rectangular shapes. Both Max and Ellie speak about not necessarily being able to make something that will please absolutely everyone at once, or allow everyone in, much like many things in life perhaps. But who are the traditional theatre rules for, who do they serve, what else can be done to remove barriers?

Thinking in responsive or sensory ways offers something insightful to a theatre making process for all and any audiences. This feels useful and important to notice, but it also feels slightly uncomfortable. Unsure where the politics lies when this learning to make theatre for audiences who don't get enough theatre made for them, might shift into learning how to make better theatrical experiences for audiences who get theatre made for them already all the time.

Sensory work as inclusive, also then asks questions of the structures within which work is made. Swept up in a system (and arts sector) which asks for faster, better, more, with short deadlines, unfair access to funding and perpetuates its own elitisms, expectations and extractions from people and environment alike, what needs questioned? Is it, for example, enough to represent this work in a theatre's program, or what else could we also interrogate? Disabled artist and activist voices have been offering guidance, advice and making demands for a very long time. During the

fellowship, learning from the work of Birds of Paradise has been informative and generous, in this blog Sandra Alland highlights experiences during the pandemic for freelancers. In *Not Going Back To Normal*, this collective disabled arts manifesto for a radically accessible world is also filled with generous, honest, exciting and damning words.



*An empty bar or cafe during the first lockdown. The photograph is taken through the window and with the photographer's reflection in the pane of glass. In focus is an empty wooden chair next to a wooden table facing another window opposite. There are chairs stacked upside down on other tables and empty armchairs. Through the window on the opposite side of the cafe is an empty street with people walking in the distance. The photo is in black and white.*

Despite aiming to play and allow myself to fail and acknowledge structural issues, this time did also give a lot of fear. Of not getting it right, of failing, of not using my time wisely. Of causing harm or upset to others. Of not being the right person. Of overstepping, of saying the wrong thing. Of not doing enough. Of not knowing enough. Is this entire blog post naive? Of nearing the end of this time whilst still feeling very much at the beginning. Of being very much alone with my thoughts or with other people's faces and voices streaming in from my laptop rather than in the physical collaboration which I am perhaps more used to. Of 'who am I' to be here on my own in my flat supported to do this, whilst so many people, families, teachers, face such enormous difficulty this year and all years. Of feeling very slow. Feeling my way between guilt and compassion as I took breaks to look after health and mental health.

Something which Imagineate was clear about from the beginning was that this fellowship is a period of support and learning with no specific outcome expected. Something generous, overwhelming and challenging all at once. Navigating what I best need, what to do with this time which has been crafted by Imagineate and Jerwood Arts in order to do what many now call for in order to give long term, funded, supported positions. I feel incredibly fortunate to have been supported at this time.

At the middle to end point, I realise I arrived with many questions and currently have even more. (classic) I realise there are questions I am afraid to ask. Questions I don't have the language for. Questions around pulling lots of strands of research together, into tangible physical or sensory experiences or a live event. Questions of process, of bringing the right team together, of being relevant, of being responsive, of how to make space for play and seriousness together.

It's obvious that people or audiences or young people who are chronically left out, marginalised, or invisibilised, have so much to offer to the world and deepen our understandings of the world. As Naoki Higashida writes in 'The Reason I Jump: one boy's voice from the silence of autism'

*"So how do people with autism see the world, exactly? We, and only we, can ever know the answer to that one! Sometimes I actually pity you for not being able to see the beauty of the world in the same way we do. Really, our vision of the world can be incredible, just incredible ..."* (p55)



*A close up of very green ferns. Spiky green leaves curl to the left, as another leaf which is more in focus curls towards the camera. Their stems are brown. They are soft but spiky with individual leaves picked out by the light and shadow.*

Thanks to Ellen Renton for her advice on the audio description of the photographs.