

Further Afield - H.J.Giles - Final Video Edit

Bella Milroy 00:05

Hello and welcome to Further Afield, a project which discusses and explores art and disability in rural spaces. My name is Bella Milroy, I am a disabled artist based in my hometown of Chesterfield, North Derbyshire, and Further Afield is a project produced in collaboration between myself and Level Centre, who are a rurally based Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation in Rowsley, Derbyshire, just down the road from me.

Bella Milroy 00:31

The project consists of a series of interviews with disabled artists, as well as research into the experiences of disabled artists in rural settings. It seeks to promote their work and learn about the ways of making and producing art that aren't always offered the space or recognition that it deserves.

Bella Milroy 00:47

All Further Afield interviews are available to watch on the Level Centre website, and an audio podcast version will also be available to listen to. There will be transcripts of all conversations. Go to <https://levelcentre.com/> for more information about the project, access, and the contributing artists.

Bella Milroy 01:03

Further Afield is a project supported by Arts Council England, Level Centre, Shape Arts, Derbyshire Libraries, Haarlem Artspace, Arts Derbyshire and Wysing Arts Centre.

Bella Milroy 01:16

My pronouns are she/her, and for my visual description, I am a white woman in my early 30s with an oval face and round cheeks. I have pale white skin, with short brown hair and round glasses. I'm also working from home where behind me there is a grey sofa, a lamp, some cushions and a stack of shelves and drawers in the background. There may also be some dogs and a cat wandering around from time to time.

Bella Milroy 01:43

So today I have with me Harry Josephine Giles, who is a writer and performer from Orkney, who now lives in Leith. Her first novel, Deep Wheel Orcadia, which I also have a copy, holding up next to me right now, was published by Picador in October 2021 and won the 2022 Arthur C. Clarke award for science fiction book of the year. She has a PhD in creative writing from Stirling and her show Drone debuted in the Made in Scotland showcase at the 2019 Edinburgh Fringe and toured internationally.

Bella Milroy 02:21

So, Josie, welcome. Thank you so much for joining me today. How are you doing?

Harry Josephine Giles 02:26

I am doing okay, thanks so much for having me here. So hi everyone, I'm Harry Josephine Giles, Josie for short. My pronouns are also she and they. I'm a white trans woman in my mid 30s. And with sort of mid length, brown hair that is a bit sun touched at the moment. I'm wearing a drapery black top, with bare shoulders, and these like zippery accessories that have no function, but I think look really cool. Some dark pink rimmed glasses, some dangly earrings with snakes on them, and a brassy necklace with a little bird on it. I'm recording from my, from my bedroom, which you might be able to detect in the background with a blue drape, and also a bookshelf, which you can see behind me, which is filled with books by trans writers and I'll give you some points, if you can recognize any of them by the spines.

Bella Milroy 03:35

Oh, what a fantastic introduction. That was a really lovely visual description. Thank you so much Josie. So perhaps we could just start off today by telling us a little bit about your work and what you're up to at the moment?

Harry Josephine Giles 03:49

Sure. So I'm a writer and performer. I've been working away at that for the last, I don't know, dozen, 15 years or so professionally. I work across poetry and theatre and other forms of literature and other things that happen on the stage. These days are mostly working in books, although in past years, I've done a bit more of the kind of theater end of things. And my last book Deep Wheel Orcadia is a science fiction novel in first, and I'm working on the next poetry book at the moment which should be coming out next year, which news on that soon. A big chunk of my writing work happens in the field of minority languages. So So I grew up in Orkney, where and when I was growing up and still now the Orkney form of Scots was the ordinary language of community. And so I've done quite a bit of work in both in writing in that form and a bit of kind of advocacy around Scots as well. And the next kind of adventure of my life is that I'm soon having been studying Gaelic, one of Scotland's other languages, other minority languages for a couple of years, and going away to Skye soon, to study Gaelic full time and learn a bit more about that language, which is not the language of my home. But it's a language that I'm very interested in learning more about and learning more about the literature and culture of it as well.

Bella Milroy 05:30

Oh, thank you. Wow yeah, that sounds yeah, so interesting. I was really excited to hear you share about that process and I really look forward to, yeah, learning more about that. And I think that's a really great opener to what I'd first like to talk about with you because when I first approached you to be part of this programme, you were particularly thoughtful in your response in sharing your concerns that you are not actually living currently in a rural space. Which for a series talking to artists about rural spaces is a fair point. However, I was really excited to talk to you for lots of reasons but particularly from within this context of someone who's from Orkney, has lived rurally and now doesn't. And actually, as you just shared, will be living rurally again soon. And I just wanted to also emphasise as well, I'm really conscious in these questions, not to centre urban locations as the default space, and really approach the exploration of rural experiences from a place of learning and understanding rather than further othering. So I really appreciate your generosity and sharing some of these cross geographical experiences in this way. So perhaps you maybe you could tell me a little bit about your creative practice within rural contexts and perhaps how about how you arrived at living in your current location of Leith.

Harry Josephine Giles 06:56

Sure, yeah, so I've been I've been in Leith for, I've been in Leith for about the last 10 years. Leith if you don't know is the port area of Edinburgh in North Edinburgh. And it used to be a separate borough actually, it used to be a whole separate town, but it got incorporated into Edinburgh in the early early 20th century and maintains quite a strong separate identity, which is why I say that I live in Leith, I'm not a born and bred Leither but you know, you can be in adoptive Leither as well. It's the more because it's the former port area, it's the more kind of working class area of Edinburgh. It's the more multicultural area of Edinburgh. And also, for now, it's also a part of Edinburgh, where there's quite a strong, queer community, I say for now, because, Leith, a lot of similar areas is undergoing a long process of gentrification. And I'm already seeing like the number of people leaving the areas that are in my communities and that gentrification has seemed to accelerate because of recent recent changes to the transport infrastructure here. So we've now got a whole new tram system that runs from the commuter villages and the airport, all the way into Leith, which is this kind of access of gentrification. So we're going to be seeing this displacement of people. And I kind of I outline all of this because it's one of the reasons that is pulling me now back to living in a rural space because I'm at a time where the neighbourhood that I live in, that I've made my home in for the last 10 years is changing, not entirely in ways that I appreciate. And so it feels time for me to be making a move in my life. And I grew up in the Scottish islands, I grew up in a very small island population of 700 people. So really about as rural as you get. And the islands and rural spaces generally are still even now having lived in a city for 10 years, the place I feel happiest the place I feel calmest, the place I feel most in myself. And so I'm I'm trialling through this study, I move back to that kind of location to see if that's where I want to be. But you asked kind of how I end up here. Some of it is just the coincidences of life. The when I when I finished studying, I had friends and people close to me in Edinburgh and I had at the time I was I was much more involved in direct environmental activism than I am now. And that community that I was part of was here as well. So I moved here for the community and I also and the other community that I suppose I moved to Leith for is the queer community which is something that's harder to find in rural spaces and was something I very much needed at that point in my life. The kind of flipside of that, in that finding like political and queer community in an urban setting, which, which is still easier to find here, as I kind of alluded to, like, it's so so I'm, I'm autistic. That's, that's the the main, I suppose disability that I'm bringing into this conversation. And urban life is actually very hard for me on that level, that the the noise and crowds of the urban environment is, is not conducive to me. And the rural environment is actually, in many ways, more accessible to me, or rather, my life is calmer and I am, my sensory needs are better cared for, in the rural environment. And that's not to say that that's that's the same across disabilities and neurodiversities but that's kind of how it shows up for me. So, so in my life, there are these tensions between different parts of my being and the needs that those have in different ways.

Bella Milroy 11:22

Wow, thank you so much for sharing that that's a given a really kind of a great picture of the pushes and pulls, like you say those tensions and I guess the kind of conflicting access points of the different parts that are fulfilled and then somewhat compromised in those different spaces and what those different urban and rural spaces offer in that way for you. Thank you so much for sharing that. I guess maybe, I'd love to talk to you a little bit about perhaps some of the barriers of staying in rural spaces for you as a

disabled artists, and or if or if that was or if that necessarily presented itself as clear barriers. I don't know if that is an applicable thing to say in that, such a straightforward way but.

Harry Josephine Giles 12:12

Yeah, I erm. There's, you know, there's some, I think there's some career level barriers and that's because an arts career, an arts career really depends on being able to build networks of professional networks of support, interest, work, finance. And that's always been a challenge for me. I find accessing a lot of the more normative ways of doing that, very, let's say neurotypical, let's say ablest maybe in that the, you know, the drinks mixer, or the art opening, or the literary salon are spaces that I dread, that I have to conserve energy to go to, plan to recover from afterwards. I view kind of taking part in those things as a, as a trial and something that I've occasionally done because I had to and one of the. I had to find other ways of building my artistic networks and one of the ways that I did that was through running my own events, and and being the being the organiser of things, which is, it might sound counterintuitive but I think other some other some other autistic people, some other neurodiverse people, though, of course, of course, not all of us will identify with, that when you have a role and when you have a specific set of tasks involved in say, organising a performance poetry night, that's actually a lot easier to cope with socially than attending a networking event.

Bella Milroy 14:17

Yes.

Harry Josephine Giles 14:18

And that's the kind of thing that's much harder to do in a rural setting and indeed in Scotland, it's a lot harder to do outside what we call the central belt, which is the axis, the urban conurbation, essentially between Edinburgh and Glasgow that beyond that in the smaller cities, or in rural spaces, it's very hard to keep events like that going, very hard to find the audiences for them, harder to access the funding for them because of as, throughout the UK, funding disparities between kind of urban centres and rural or, indeed, like the capital cities and smaller towns. So, so I think that kind of career level barrier was there for me. But the the other side of that is that, you know that all disabled people are different within and across disabilities and our access needs are different. And as they're kind of pointed to before, for me, because my work is mostly solo, because my work mostly does not depend because I am writing it does not depend so much anymore on accessing particular kinds of physical space, accessing particular kinds of social space. In those aspects, living rurally doesn't present particular access barriers to me, which is, which is fortunate but also something it's something I'm glad of but that's that's because my career has reached a certain point where I feel like I can take the, what I know will be a bit of a hit in terms of not being in the scene, not being like present in all of the rooms where money is flowing, and, and interest and attention, you know that those flow in particular rooms and rural artists, disabled artists, all minorities artists are excluded from those flows in various ways. So it's having established myself a bit that I feel more confident in making that move.

Bella Milroy 16:37

Yes. Oh, wow thank you so much, Josie. Again you've captured the the nuances of that experience really beautifully. Yeah, thank you. I guess, yeah, you've touched on this a little bit but perhaps can you share, like, what excites you about the prospect of living in a rural space again soon?

Harry Josephine Giles 16:58

Yeah, waking up to a density of birdsong that is important to me, being able to go for a walk on the beach in the hills, that is important to me, like, honestly, those are things that I live for, and the smell of being in an island like that's, that calms my mind. So those are the things that excite me. I think something else I'm excited by and nervous of, is exploring a different, not exploring, it's the wrong word, it's very kind of, very colonial term we use exploring isn't it, these things to discover like, it's interesting, the degree to which that vocabulary has infiltrated our lexicon. So not exploring, but being part of a different form of community that is centred around geographical locality, which is particularly the case with Island communities, you know, they're boundedness the sea border is as much as psychological border as a physical one, I mean, even Skye with its' bridge, you know the, the island defines a geographical community by itself and it creates bonds of responsibility, both to people and to land that have a very different weight than the more fluid and sometimes transient and easily dispersed communities of an urban environment, particularly in urban environment like Leith that is undergoing major economic change. Or, you know, the comings and goings of community on the internet. It's it's different being in an island community, the bonds are, are a different kind of bond and you find yourself by necessity thrown together with people who you might not otherwise be thrown together with, that you you form connection across difference, through the common bond of an island. Yeah.

Bella Milroy 19:24

Oh, wow. That was a really beautiful way of describing the potential community found there. Yeah. Thank you for that. That was, that was brilliant. And I guess in terms of like, again, I feel like you're leading on my question so brilliantly here. Like, is there is there different access points within those communities that you are, yeah, you know are going to be the places in which you are, there will be greater access and there's other points which will be a limited, more limited access to kind of integrate, I don't know if integrating is, is the right word, but kind of finding that connection like you say to that to that new community.

Harry Josephine Giles 20:14

My, my concerns there are more, more about queerness and transness than about disability. And I think in saying that I want to dispel like some kind of false notions about like rural queerphobia and rural and transphobia, which in my experience, like does not exist any more than urban queerphobia and urban transphobia. And like, I would generally feel safer, you know, walking in the dark in my home island than I would walking down a well lit street in the Edinburgh city centre, where I will be walking past like groups of posh drunk lads, you know, who were who were, who set off all my danger signals. Whereas in an island, like I know everybody and I know, who I might occasionally need to avoid and who I don't need to avoid and things like that. So, so safety concerns are very different but it does, you know, it exists in rural spaces as much as it exists in urban spaces but, but what's different is that my my life depends and has depended on, being around a community of, of trans people, particularly trans women, who I've relied on for care, support, medical knowledge. My life has also relied on access to health care which is much, much more difficult to access from the Scottish rural setting because gender identity healthcare is so restricted, already because the barriers to accessing it which, I don't know, maybe I need to re-rehearse for this because this podcast audience, I don't know, if people aren't aware that along with the, the know much more widely publicised issue of waiting lists, which thankfully, I no

longer have to deal with. Even when you're within the NHS gender identity healthcare system, the level of care that we receive is deeply neglectful. There is a deep, there's an incredible shortage of appointments, there's an incredible shortage of expertise, you have to fight for every ounce of healthcare and these things that I'm now saying about trans healthcare will, of course, be familiar to a disabled audience as well, that when you need specialised forms of health care, those can be very difficult to access from some rural spaces. So that in particular is a concern for me and this is a conversation that I think is important to have across trans and disabled communities because they are so intertwined. And the ways that we struggle with the health system are so intertwined. So there's that level of things. And then just just backtracking a little bit because of all of that, having lots of trans people around you have various forms of expertise in negotiating and circumventing these systems has been very important to me. So similarly, one of the reasons I'm able to think about returning to a rural space now is because I've got so far through, I've got far enough through my transition, that certain things are less urgent than they once were and my mechanisms of support are much stronger than they once were so I can, I think you know, access those better having gotten to a certain place. Yeah.

Bella Milroy 24:04

Wow, thank you so much for sharing, sharing that Josie appreciate the the generosity and the vulnerability of that sharing. Yeah, it's greatly appreciated. It's, thank you so much. And again, I think you've captured the, yeah, the intersections of those queer and disabled experiences and those access points and how they are, like you say connected. Yeah, you captured that so, so brilliantly, I'm really grateful, thank you. And I wonder if, as part of again, part of your capacity to be able to envision yourself beyond the immediate vicinity of your community where you are now is that capacity for, I know myself in my own essential networks of other crips, other disabled people is that the ability to be beyond my own body. You know, some of my most closest companions and friends like that, are people that I've never spent, never physically been in the same space as and do you expect that to be a kind of continued component of supporting your, you in that new space?

Harry Josephine Giles 25:26

I think so and that's also how I grew up you know, like, I grew up on the internet, I grew up on the mid and late 90s Internet, which was a completely different place. And that's how I found my first, you know, queer communities. It's how I found myself in many ways. So I'm gonna have to go back to some of that. At the same time, I keep saying to all my friends in Edinburgh, like, come and come and visit, like, I'll put you up and you can, you can come and stay with us. And I think, I think I'm gonna have to, I think that physical connection is also, you know, important to me and I think there'll be different kinds of in person socialisation that I'll need to, yeah.

Bella Milroy 26:22

Yes, it's so challenging, isn't it. I know myself as someone who doesn't live in the same place as any of my friends, and even though my geographic location is, apologies for audiences, you've heard me say this before, but I'll describe Chesterfield as rural adjacent, it's, it's like, connected to and in a part of a rural kind of creative space on the edge of the Peak District, but is nonetheless a town. And yeah, it's a really, again, the tension is there. And it's really nice to hear you say, you've got that in mind of like, you know, not just inviting but you know, wanting and expecting people to come come and see you. And it's

it's sometimes something that I know myself I find hard to expect of others to come all the way all the way out. But you know, that should be very much a value to others as much to me as well, right?

Harry Josephine Giles 27:17

Yeah, I mean, I want people to come and be with me in the Scottish Highlands and Islands, like, as far as I'm concerned, they should be lucky. These people are lucky.

Bella Milroy 27:28

Yeah. Totally. That's a lovely a lovely way to reflect on that. Thank you. I'd like to talk a little bit about your wonderful book again for listeners I'm holding the book up next to me, Deep Wheel Orcadia, which had the pleasure of both listening to and then reading in print as well, which I think was a really special way of experiencing the work and you deliver that text so, so beautifully. And I hope none of this is trite at this point in your showcasing of the of the book. But I mean, just a couple of whilst whilst we're here together just a couple of special things from it of just the way you use language in, some of my favourites were flame, flicker flare, and person body, and empty hungry were just, they really have stayed with me and I really really loved reading it. So encourage audiences far and wide to pick it up or listen and or listen. So for those who don't know your book, the Deep Wheel Orcadia, I'll just give a short description. It's described as a magical first, a science fiction verse novel written in the Orkney dialect. This unique adventure in minority language poetry comes with a parallel transition into playful and vivid English so the reader will miss no nuance of the original. Perhaps you can tell me a little bit about the experience of creating the book, what was it like researching it? Were you able to connect with other skilled creative people who had vast knowledge of the Orkney dialect, history and culture? And has that research and influence always been present in your work? Or was this like a quite a distinct opportunity to take this into a different place?

Harry Josephine Giles 29:26

Yeah, so the book began actually with a bit of funding from Creative Scotland, which is the Scottish equivalent of Arts Council England for people who aren't familiar with it, to go home to Orkney and do some specific research in the Orkney language. So I started with a four month kind of self organised residency at home where I met with as many practitioners as I could, read as many books as I could, which is there's not a huge literature but we do have it, a literature in the Orkney tongue. And spending some time in the archives, listening to archive recordings and looking at the different ways that language had been written in the past. So, so from its beginning, the the book was actually born of that process of being at home, being in the islands and talking with people who are working with the language and thinking about how the language can be written. And so the themes of the book, the the story of the book all come from, you know, that initial place and it took me about six years to write the book and it involves that involves regular periods of return, I sort of couldn't write it anywhere, except I had to keep going home to do the big chunks of work on it because it wasn't coming out in the same way when I was in Edinburgh. Some of that was also written in Shetland, which is the islands north of Orkney. Have a very, very similar language and actually a more developed literature and advocacy for that language in Shetland. So so so it's always relied on other people's knowledge and expertise and those that communication as well with other people who were doing that. And organising events for the language as well was part of that, that process and then the story of the book also kind of comes out of this and relates to this because as well as being a bit of a formal experiment, it's a story about the

relationship to home. Home in this case is a space station, but it's a space station that's a metaphor for an island, or maybe an island is a metaphor for a space station, or it's looking at how, in a kind of science fiction genre setting, we can imagine the remote places are the places on the fringes of human expansion and there's a lot I could say there about Orkney's role in various empires and the ways that we've been fringe and the ways that we've been central but that's that's maybe drifting a little off topic. The plot of the book is a love story between two people, one of whom grew up in Mars, which is my standin for like, an urban centre, cosmopolitan urban centre and is visiting this space station, which is called Orcadia for the first time and one of whom is returning home to Orcadia, having grown up there and being away at art school in Mars so this is obviously not remotely autobiographical. It's a love story between these two figures who have this different relationship to the fringe, to the remote Space Station/ Island. And that's, that's a story that grew out of these periods of research.

Bella Milroy 33:08

Oh, thank you so much, I feel like I got a whole other, yeah, a whole other layer of goodness to that. Yeah thank you so much. Yeah, perhaps going on from that in terms of like, you know, your, the, the durational experience of creating a book over that many years and returning back home and connecting with those other skilled and creative people to inform the text, perhaps you could tell me a bit about creating our Orkneys creative community and following on from that has writing the book enhance your connection to it, both in terms of other creatives and artists and audiences as well?

Harry Josephine Giles 33:56

Yes, so art is has a very, very strong creative community I would say, as a, as a rural place. It's a really an exceptional number of writers and artists, both folk that grew up in Orkney and I've found their way in the arts and folk that have moved to Orkney specifically to work on their art or to want to be in that community. And that's that appears in the the really extraordinary degree of community arts that are around, so Orkney is one of the places in Scotland for example, where free instrument tuition is still part of the curriculum so that every child in the school still has a chance to learn an instruments. And that fits very directly into a really nationally significant folk music scene, for example. It's really important folk artists have come out and musicians working in other genres of music too. We also, you know, that for a while the the composer Laureate, Peter Maxwell Davies lived in Orkney. We also had George Mackay Brown, who was a nationally significant writer who has left a lot of inspiration in his wake and they together were involved in founding the St Magnus Festival, which is an annual festival of the arts in Orkney, happening at the more high culture end of stuff, not to say that high culture is more valuable than community arts but these are the terms that we're stuck with unfortunately. It does mean that you have that kind of full offering of what's happening in Orkney and as a result, a huge number of writers and artists, visual artists, musicians, that that's just always been their, community drama, as well is a huge part of local culture and was just always part of my life. So I consider it the place that has fed, you know, my artistic self from the very beginning. Yeah, I'm singing the praises of my home because I love my home and now I've forgotten what the other part of that question was.

Bella Milroy 36:22

No that's fine, you've sung it beautifully and it's, it's wonderful to share the richness of that creative space that we should all know more about and.

Harry Josephine Giles 36:36

I think that yeah, I think the reason that I kind of go on about it, is again, and I mean, I know that you and the people that you're working with in this project, don't have this misconception, but people always assume that rural places, and particularly Island communities have less, you know, have less stuff. And sometimes we have far, far more, you know.

Bella Milroy 36:59

Yeah, absolutely. And the kind of the unique conditions of which those communities exist in, can support creativity in a wholly different way.

Harry Josephine Giles 37:10

Yeah.

Bella Milroy 37:10

As well, the opportunities, you know, that arise from that. Yeah, it's like you say, it's a real, real misconception that.

Harry Josephine Giles 37:19

Yeah and as you say those conditions, like, it's actually it's not, it's not just a coincidence, it's part of, it's part of the cultural and geographical makeup of places. So, you know, the free music and tuition is, is there partly because folk music as a, as a, as an, you know, a part of community life, like a part of what weaves the community together The community drama is as strong as it is because of the need to entertain each other on very very very dark winter nights when there's less to do in the farm and it can be very depressing, and you have to bond with each other and you have to entertain with each other through that time so you know, it comes from the social fabric and the geographical fabric of the place.

Bella Milroy 38:11

Oh you've painted such a fantastic picture there of the kind of like essential, that it's not just something that, you know, someone's on the council has looked at as, oh free music tuition is good for kids and free drama tuition is good for kids, like thumbs up kind of thing. It's like, no, it's an integrated component of the way the culture is functioning and an essential component of that. Thank you so much for sharing that. I feel like I'm saying thank you so much for sharing that on every single answer you're giving, but it's all just so rich and generous. It's wonderful. Thank you. And I guess my fault, my follow on was just that, you know, has writing the book enhanced your connection to that culture, both in terms of the other creatives that you were working along, working with and in terms of audiences of the of the book as well, perhaps?

Harry Josephine Giles 39:03

Yeah, I think so. I think so. It's, I you know, I did a launch for the in Edinburgh because that's the, you know, it's the city of literature, it's, you know, where, where I had to kind of do it, professionally speaking, to give the book its, you know, entry into the world and then I organised my own launch for it in Orkney and the library that I got books from all the way through childhood and because, you know, it had to actually have it's, from my mind that was it's real launch, you know, it was it was in there and people came and I was able to have conversations with the people that really, I'd written the book with

and for, and that was, that was a very emotionally significant event for me. And having done this big piece of work that really, really kind of for reforged my connection to home, is another of the reasons that I'm pulled back in some way because there's something else I think about rural community is that it's, at least for the islands, it's they're not overly interested in what's happening in the city but like, sometimes there's an assumption that you know, the city has all the good stuff and you must just be missing that and wanting all of that but actually, you don't you just kind of get on with what you've got it at home when you're on the island. It's not, yeah, there's not so much of a longing to know, pay attention to what's going on in the city because it's not what's immediately relevant. And so, as when, as I'm living here, the kind of vice versa, I feel a little bit out of touch at the moment now that I've not, you know, I haven't been working actively on the book for the last two years. And I'm like, oh, what's happening at home? What's happening in Orkney, I don't know, I feel a bit out of touch. I've not visited as much as I wanted to, which also the pandemic is part of that as well. The restriction on on travel movement. That's been harder. So So I, yeah, I feel a longing to, in myself be a little less interested in what's happening in Edinburgh and a little more interested in what's happening at home. Yeah.

Bella Milroy 41:30

Yeah, that's a nice kind of shift of focus, isn't it? Yeah, that's really nice. Great. And so I guess I'd like to hear your thoughts around what you like, what you kind of envision the influence of rural spaces and cultures like Orkney and then where you will be in Skye soon, like, what that will, how that will influence your work and practice. And I say that really carefully in how, you know what, you know, not in again, not wanting to other that experience, like, why I'm not saying why, I'm not, I'm not asking why Leith isn't influencing your work, you know, in that way but I'm curious to know what you kind of expecting that experience to influence like, Will another Deep Wheel Orcadia emerge from your time in Skye or something like that you know?

Harry Josephine Giles 42:27

Yeah. I mean, it's quite a tricky question because I'm sort of open to whatever happens. One of the reasons you know, making this leap is precisely to kind of send my life on a left turn and see where it goes and and learn what arises from that. I do have one sort of, one specific aim, which is the reason that the reason that I've started out that I've been studying Gaelic and the reason that I wanted to be studying Gaelic to fluency, which is about making connection across communities. And that maybe that needs a little bit of kind of historical context for for people so so Skye in the Western Isles of Scotland, so off the west coast, Orkney is the northern Isles off the north coast, north north coast, say 1000 years ago, that was all on sort of what we would call the sea road, the one sea road, all part of the same Norse kingdom of the Isles. Where we were, we were settled by, by by Vikings, essentially. And then with that, when that kind of period of history waned and other kingdoms other empires rose, the Northern Isles and the Western Isles really quite separated from each other culturally and most of all separated from each other linguistically. So the Western Isles are the place where Gaelic which is a Celtic language is strongest and the northern Isles are the place in Scotland where Scots which is a Germanic language, totally different language family is strongest. The northern Isles along with Aberdeenshire in the northeast of Scotland, so because of this language barrier, a series of islands that are geographically really quite close there's there's a tough bit of sea between us but you know, you can sail across it, became culturally quite separated and linguistically totally separated and that there was really no linguistic commonality between them until English as a language force, minoritised both

Scots and Gaelic and started pushing Scots and Gaelic further to their fringes and so, so the islands could communicate with each other through English, right. So there's a bit of your historical background but now of course, the economic issues, the social issues and the linguistic issues faced by Scots in the Northern Isles, Gaelic in the Western Isles and also our cultures are really very, very, very similar. So those are things like Island depopulation, high high high rates of holiday letting and setting home, second home ownership pushing up rural rents, displacing communities, which is also displacing crucially linguistic communities, so that that becomes an issue, the anglicisation of, by which I mean the use of English as the dominant language of the cultures. And the decline of fishing industries, the consolidation of agriculture so that small farming becomes less tenable as a way of life. So all of these and climate change now, less through rising sea levels, because of geography and more through the changes to what you can do with farming and fishing. So all of these issues are shared right between our our communities, but actually that the Northern Isles and the Western Isles don't know that much about each and we don't talk that much between us. There's kind of an odd thing. Now I'm a writer, language is my subjects and minority language is the thing that I'm kind of committed to linguistically politically. And so what I care about is making links between what's going on for Scots and particularly the Scots that I know, in the Northern Isles and what's going on for Gaelic and the Western Isles. And I think that my understanding of minority language revitalisation from my mother tongue is going to be enriched by knowing better the issues facing Gaelic and the revitalisation work that's been done in Gaelic. And to be honest, they although Gaelic is very much under threat as a language, that the the work that's been done in Gaelic is much stronger and more developed than what's happened and Scots so far, for all sorts of complicated reasons. And so I'm, I want to be part of those conversations and I want to forge better links between, so that that was a bit of a tangent but the reason for kind of saying all that is to explain some of my motivations for this particular turn and to talk talk more about my reorientation towards rurality as being what I am interested in as an artist, where I want to be as an artist and language, I think, for really all of your real all the rural spaces have their own languages that are entwined with their cultures, whether those are as linguistically different as Gaelic, like an ordinary Scots, you know, that that varies from area to area. But for me, you know, language underlies a lot of what's going on culturally in rural spaces.

Bella Milroy 48:33

Oh wow, that was again, a wonderful, rich and vast picture of the kind of different motivations of of potential influences and I am, I love to work in that way as well, that kind of essentially, what I'd often describe is just like pulling away that thread, just pulling at it, tugging away at that thread and being led by that and that feels like that's exactly what you're doing in those spaces and being led by that experience and yeah, it sounds wonderful, I'm really excited for you. Lastly, I think I'd just really liked to hear a little bit more about a project of yours that I really loved and deeply appreciated, which is called "Not Going Back to Normal", which is described as "a collectively-written disabled artists manifesto and showcase, produced during the coronavirus pandemic and imagining a crip future". Could you perhaps tell me a little bit about the project?

Harry Josephine Giles 49:41

Sure, sure. Every time I hear the name of it now, I experienced this like knife of shock because we you know, we declared this intention of not going back to normal and here we are, like, stuck in a situation of being forcibly and violently and in complete denial of reality continually pushed into the normal, right?

Bella Milroy 50:06

Yes, yes. A perfect description

Harry Josephine Giles 50:10

Violently renormalised despite all our hopes and desires. That said, so I should say first, that it was co-created by myself and the artist Sasha Saben Callaghan. So it was very much, we jointly organised and curated that project. And one of the reasons for that is, us both bringing different perspectives from different identities, different disabilities, that I was a, it was never a project I wanted to do by myself because I feel like, yeah, disability is such a broad field of people, you need multiple perspectives to make anything good happen,

Bella Milroy 50:51

Yes definitely.

Harry Josephine Giles 50:52

And then building on that, that multiple perspective-ness of it was essential to the project. So we were given a commission to create an artistic response from a disabled perspective to like, the question of disability and the arts. And we were like, well, we don't want to just take this money and like, do this one thing that's from these two people, we want to do something that is more collectively oriented and models, different ways of thinking about the arts and enables disabled artists to say exactly what they want to say. So Sasha and I came up with this idea of putting together a showcase of disabled artists working in Scotland, as both a book and an online showcase and we put out an open call for anyone to make art, either responding or not responding to the conditions of the time, which was late 2020, early 2021. And we, we paid each artists a small fee to exhibit and as a piece of curation, we, we didn't exclude a single person who sent us something, so so part of our idea of curating it was that everybody who had something to say, whether they were a quote, unquote, professional artist or not, whether or not they had any quote, unquote, training or not, we would give that a place where that could be heard. It was, it was a fairly major commission in terms of the amount of money involved and the profile that it had. It was, you know, it was intended, it was organised by a consortium of Scottish; we pointed to the kind of problematic nature of this term, visual arts organisations, and we had to do something about this term visual arts because, of course, not not all of the artists that we worked with had vision, when we're talking about disability arts, but that's the term that they were using anyways. So we're working with these organisations, gallery arts organisations, who wanted you know, to do a piece of work around disability and accessibility. And then Sasha and I wrote a manifesto that framed kind of all of that, and all of this is still available and notgoingbacktonormal.com. And I, we have seen, after that piece of work, actually a bit of change I would say, in the organisations that we worked with, that commissioned the piece of work and that we were speaking back to and speaking back to in a very uncensored and very angry way. And we, I have seen gallery arts organisations in Scotland, a number of them do more work now around accessibility and do better work integrating a disabled perspective, not just into what they're commissioning but into their organising processes. And that's good. On the other hand, we have the violent renormalisation that we referred to at the beginning still and the arts as an industry and as an industry that is riven by class inequality and ablest inequality, as guilty of perpetrating as every other institution of power in our society. So that is still ongoing. And, you know, it's something that I always

come back to is and we put this in our manifesto, so if if, you know, 10% of the population is disabled, which it is, if not more, I haven't checked the latest results, if not higher than that, you know, at least one in 10 people has a disability, why is why do we not see 1 in 10 People exhibit in a gallery having a disability and why more crucially, do 1 in 10 people in any given arts workplace not have a disability, why are the rates of people actually making the decisions, not the rates and if these organisations are publicly funded and there's this very obvious inequality that is plain to anyone to see, then why don't we just stop their funding until they sort it out, that and we put that in the manifesto. And that's never happened and it's never going to happen but I think making that challenge of being like, look, immediately sort out your hiring practices, or we take your money away. To me, that's a very, that's a very reasonable proposition, but it's never been adopted.

Bella Milroy 55:32

I mean, it's a wonderful premise isn't it. To be able to just kind of like have that, like you say, just a manifesto of reasonable demands.

Harry Josephine Giles 55:42

So reasonable, so reasonable and that that said, like, I also want to kind of sound a note of caution around that kind of politics of representation, which you know and we also spoke to this in our manifesto, as well that, you know, when we talk about quotas, when we talk about representation, whether that's in a gallery, or a book, or a board or a commission announcement. What that inevitably leads to within a deeply unequal society, what that what that inevitably leads to in a class society is that the, the people that, the people that get then represented are those within a given given identity group that have the most economic advantage within that group and have the, that have the least strong support needs within that group that, in other words, make the fewest demands of the institution into which they're being incorporated. Like we see this across gender, sexuality, disability, we see this across, you know, different political programs from minority groups, marginalised groups that use representation as a political aim. And all of that is to say that without a fundamental restructuring of both the economy of the institutions and the economy of the society we're in, the fundamental inequalities that shaped disabled lives, that impoverished the majority of disabled lives are not going to change, you're not going to change that by having 1 in 10 disabled artists in a gallery because chances are, that those disabled artists are going to have other advantages that the majority of disabled people do not.

Bella Milroy 57:44

Yes yes, completely. And it's that kind of understanding, it's the framework itself that is broken and simply trying to apply ourselves that do not exist on that framework to that structure is not going to, it's never going to, it's never going to relieve the thing is it? Yeah and I think that was a really important point to make about the limitations of those kinds of approaches in that respect.

Harry Josephine Giles 58:15

And it's also something that's never going to be, that's never going to be captured in a diversity monitoring form. Right. For as long as you know, I mean, the move towards forms of self identification, in our identity categories is, you know vital, is politically important, has been, is about taking power away from the institutions that have minoritised us, right. So I'm not speaking against that by any means but what I am saying is that a form never captures existing economic inequality.

Bella Milroy 58:54

Yes and also, it's about being able to understand how we find, reach and support those who wouldn't even identify that way but still have the needs, still have the thing, the barriers that that aren't being addressed because of multiple different reasons, isn't it and I think disability has a particular kind of experience of that, that the door needs to be blown off and made so much wider for people to be able to feel like that they can ask for more, ask for what they need in a different way.

Harry Josephine Giles 59:30

And I feel I feel that you know, that one of the reasons I try and say stuff like this as much as I can, is born actually as much from or if not more from my my transness, as from you know, my experience of autism. Which is that like I am, it very often in an arts context, very very often the only, the only trans woman in the room, like over and over and over again and you know, God forbid there should ever be more than one trans woman on a panel that I am part of. And so so I know and all of us who are minorities know when we're part of these that that, that when we do these things the organisations get get to tick a box. And we hate that we know that, you know, we hate it because we don't want to have to think of ourselves in that way. And we don't want to constantly be asked, second guessing ourselves and thinking, am I only getting this because I tick this box, it's horrible weight to carry. And it also means and that that weight, that's a term that I keep coming back to, it's that, that when we go into these rooms, these spaces, these these meetings, the burden of advocacy and the burden of representation is placed on our shoulders, whether or not we want it, you know and so here I am, having fought my way into a number of rooms, fought my way to a certain level of career success as a trans woman, where there are, there are there are, there are so few of us, in in the UK, that have published a novel with the press, right. There are so few of us that I know all of them by name. Right. And I've done, most of them are my friends, right. You know, we've because we've, there are that few of us right and so I know that I have, I have advantages in these rooms, that the vast majority of my friends who are trans women do not do not have that I know, the degree of inequality, poverty, deprivation, faced by trans people in general and trans feminine people in specific, very very intimately. And, and that is not spoken about in these rooms.

Bella Milroy 1:01:55

Yes and the way in which that advocacy ends up taking up the time, the energy, the organisation away from what you're just supposed to be an artist, you're supposed to turn up and be an artist. And yet you've got this other whole other job to do alongside of that times infinity, you know. Yeah, it's, it's, it's really, really crucial for us to reflect on that. And and what would you are you, could you speak about what you, do you think that rurally based arts organisations are prepared, lesser or more so or is there any difference in in that for how they support artists in that way, particularly within disabled context but in general, is that something that you are, are you're expecting to be working with other with arts organisations in rural settings when you go to Skye or.

Harry Josephine Giles 1:03:00

That's a really interesting question. I do not, I genuinely don't have an answer. I don't think I have enough experience to, to say an answer on that. I do know that, I do know that like, I should say, you know, this is a this is a podcast, about disability and about access. And I have been quite deliberately,

like repeatedly turning the conversation towards transness and queerness, as well because because the two things are not explicable for me. I know that you know that and I'm sure the audience appreciate that as well. I know that I am more, even more likely than I am now to very regularly be the only trans person in the room, the only trans women in the room like that's, that's gonna be a thing that happens in rural settings more often because the population is smaller. That's the only reason. So I'm expecting to feel a certain amount of minority strain around that. As for whether rural arts organisations are better set up to deal with access needs, I'm not sure. I think that in my experience of rural communities, there is this kind of two sides of it, that on the one hand because everybody knows each other, in the kind of very very rural space that I'm used to, where you know, everyone's neighbours. Access becomes less a general question of how, less a general question of how a general public is granted access and more a very specific question of knowing everybody around who has, what their specific needs are and the kind of care that comes with that. That you know, if you're expecting Jean who lives down the road to come, then you know that you need to make sure that the ramp is there for jeans wheelchair to get up in and you know that you need to have that space and the community halls set aside for for Jean to be in, right. That's, that's more the kind of question that you're that your that you're dealing with. And so on the one hand, that very personal approach to life means that sometimes access can be better. And on the other hand, not having the economic resources that urban organisations often have because of aforementioned inequalities in funding. And also not having always, as general a view of needing to meet all of these access needs means that sometimes things are missing because the question hasn't come up. And I think related to that, you know, I hope I have not been too utopian around rural communities. I've spoken a lot about what I love about islands. And I think I think similarly, then I've spoken about the forms of community connection, belonging that are very important to me because those bonds tend to be so strong in rural communities, then the flip side of that is also the case that when exclusion and isolation happens in a rural setting, they're even more destructive and devastating than in an urban setting because if you are, out group, if you are excluded, isolated in a rural setting, you have very few people to turn to. And so that becomes a question for disability as well, that if someone actually isn't tied into those networks of care, if if they've gotten lost somewhere, if they've been hidden away, somehow, it can be much harder.

Bella Milroy 1:06:59

Yes, I think you yeah, I really appreciated that sharing on a really large, complex question around rural artistic, creative spaces in particular and access points. And the, you know, it's a really vast thing that it can cannot be answered by one question with one person, isn't it? So I appreciate your sharing around that. I think I think that's pretty much everything. Unless there was anything in particular, you wanted to share about any of what we've discussed?

Harry Josephine Giles 1:07:42

What else to say? I mean, I yeah, I looking forward to the next phase of my life and learning, relearning how, all of the ways in which everything that I've said in the last hour is, like mistaken and wrong because, you know, I'm talking from the perspective of, I'm talking in all this time, from the perspective of where I grew up and how I grew up. And if somebody who has, who has moved between the rural and urban setting, you know repeatedly and and that's a, that's a different kind of knowledge, it's a knowledge, it's a different kind of knowledge than the knowledge that comes from being deeply embedded in community over a very long period of time, which is a knowledge I hope to have the grace

to know again, right. So I'm sure there's ways in which everything I've said has been, you know, limited by the perspectives that I have but I hope those perspectives in some places had been useful as well.

Bella Milroy 1:08:40

Oh Josie, it's been an incredibly, you've you've offered such an invaluable array of different kinds of thoughts and experiences and perspectives on these questions and just really, really grateful for your time and your, yeah, your thinking on this has been, it's been wonderful. And it'll it will make for a really fantastic conversation to share. Thank you so much.

Harry Josephine Giles 1:09:06

Well I'm glad and thank you for the conversation. It's been really stimulating. I'm glad to have this chance to think about these things and glad to bounce the ideas off you.

Bella Milroy 1:09:16

That's wonderful. I'm so, I'm really glad that's been a positive experience for you as well. That's, that's really great. These conversations inspire me in so many different ways, as I say, like my own experience of my geographic location was, like I say, not being exclusively rural but away from lots of other places, more centralised spaces and the compounding nature of my experience of illness in that it, there's so much share the sharing that you've offered, there's been, there's been so many things that I connect with and have offered different understandings of that so yeah, it's been wonderful. Thank you.