

# Further Afield - Webinar 1

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

spaces, people, rural, experiences, based, artists, programme, disabled, Bella, Louisa, mental health, practice, creative, story, question, conversation

## SPEAKERS

Bella Milroy, Rachel Veazey, Louisa Adjoa Parker, Ali Gordon, Level Centre

### Level Centre 07:48

Just welcoming people into the room and we'll be here a couple of minutes before we start. For anyone who's just joined us, we're just waiting for some people to join the conversation. We'll be here for a couple more minutes. Thank you. For anyone who's just joined us, just going to repeat that. We're just waiting for a few more people to join us. And we'll get started again. Thank you. Ok, thank you, everybody. My name is Kerry Andrews and I'm the Executive Director at LEVEL Centre, welcome to Further Afield. This is the first in a series of conversations curated by LEVEL Centre's Artistic Associate Bella Milroy. Before I hand over to Bella, and our guest speaker, Louisa Adjoa Parker to introduce themselves, we have a little bit of housekeeping. I wanted to tell you a little bit about the LEVEL Centre for those of you that are new to us today. So, my name is Kerry and I'm a white middle aged woman. I have dark curly hair, and I'm working remotely at home. I have a tall cupboard behind me and my pronouns are she/her. The conversation and question and answer session is estimated to last approximately one hour. We have two BSL interpreters with us who will alternate throughout the conversation. We have Ali Gordon and Rachel Veazey who's currently signing. Ali and Rachel will introduce themselves a bit more shortly. But if you require close captions, please turn them on in the menu bar at the bottom. We'll also have a transcription available following the event. If at any point you experience any difficulties during this webinar, we will do our best to resolve problems. If you could let us know if you're experiencing anything through the chat function. We also might need to take a comfort break at some point and should that be the case, we will let you know. We ask that any questions you may have are put into the chat function. At the end of this wonderful conversation, we'll do our best to answer as many as possible. Please know that when putting a question into the chat there is no guarantee that it will be answered. It might be similar to another question. We may just simply run out of time. When you post a question, it would be great if you're an artist or an organisation if you could say who you are and where you are based. Please know that this conversation is being recorded and it will be available on LEVEL Centre's website afterwards and other social media channels on the internet. So, a bit about LEVEL Centre. For those of you who do not know us, LEVEL Centre is a contemporary art centre based in rural Derbyshire in Rowsley in the Peak District. We're a national portfolio organisation supported by the Arts Council of England and Derbyshire County Council. We work across visual, performing and digital arts practice. We have four freelance Artistic Associates, which includes Bella who's created this wonderful Further Afield programme. We run the performing and visual classes on site and online learning disabled adults and support disabled artists through our residency programme. Further information can be found at [levelcentre.com](http://levelcentre.com). We host exhibitions, conferences and performances: The Art That Difference Makes. Shortly, I'm going to hand you over to Bella, Louisa, Ali and Rachel for each of them to take turns to introduce themselves and then Bella will start the

conversation. I'd like to thank you for joining us today and we hope you either learn something or are inspired over the next hour or so. Over to you Bella.

**Bella Milroy 13:36**

Thank you so much Kerry. It was a brilliant introduction. So I'll just introduce myself a bit more. My name is Bella Milroy. I'm a disabled artist based in Chesterfield, Derbyshire not far from where Level Centre is based in Rowsley in the Peak District. My pronouns are she/her and for my live visual description, I am a white woman in my early 30s with an oval face and round cheeks. I have pale white skin with a shaved buzz cut hairstyle and round glasses. I'm also working from home where 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. So that's me, I'll hand over to Louisa who I'll be speaking with, to introduce herself.

**Louisa Adjoa Parker 14:33**

Thanks Bella. I'm Louisa, I'm a writer, poet based in South West England and my pronouns are she/her. And my visual description is I'm middle aged, I'm not sure if I'm middle aged, I'm forty nine. I have curly hair and it's on top of my head. I'm working from home and actually I'm working from my bedroom. So, there's a plain wall, white door on my left. I'll hand over to whoever's next, thank you.

**Rachel Veazey 15:27**

Hello, my name is Rachel Veazey. I'm a sign language interpreter. I'm based in Birmingham.

**Ali Gordon 15:36**

My name's Ali Gordon, I'm a sign language interpreter. I'm based in London today. I've got a blue top on with a grey background. I've got a messy Afro and some blue rimmed glasses.

**Bella Milroy 16:01**

Ok, shall we kick things off? Good. Great. Ok, so I'd just like to introduce a little bit more about the programme and the initial premise of this. So again, welcome to this first session of Further Afield: Scenic Edge. The first in a three part series exploring practices of rurally based disabled artists and creatives. The core aspects of my personal practice strives towards better visibility and a broader cataloguing, obviously, with artists across contemporary art. And so getting the chance to apply that to my work here at LEVEL Centre as one of the Artistic Associates was really exciting, especially to explore that within the Derbyshire region as well. I immediately thought of connecting with a number of people who now make up this programme and number one on that list of people...honestly as Louise and I chatted last week, I said I finally wore her down, this is the moment to work together. So I'm very excited to be chatting with her this afternoon. The project seeks to find support and platforms for rurally based artists and creators both locally here Derbyshire and further afield too for those living rurally anywhere. And we also want the project to be a way of not only capturing the existence of these disabled experiences in rural spaces, but also as a way of creating a kind of tool sharing for disabled practices in this professional context as well. Were we interested in approaching the programme in a speculative way and just some of the things we want to explore in the project are questions surrounding what a rurally based contemporary creative practice embodies. How does this experience of disability affect or impact this? How can we affect change, take up room and promote visibility of already based disabled artists. And what are the things we need established organisations, studios and creative networks to do differently, to make being a part of the local and regional art scene more accessible. We also acknowledge the ways in which many people who fit into these categories of both disabled and or artists may well not consider themselves as such. But this is a space to explore the many nuances of

those experiences and how we consider how we might work well to make rural creative spaces more accessible for everybody. And so whilst we're really interested in connecting with and championing disabled artists, this project might be able to support and reach out to you. If you really have an interest in disability in arts and culture and have a desire to connect more with your rural art scene. Then this programme is very much for you. So that's my intro out of the way and we will get stuck into things. So, Louisa, thank you so much for joining us today. As I've said already, I'm very excited to be talking to you. Perhaps we can just start off by you giving a little window into what your practice consists of and how its rural location sits within that. Just tell us a little bit about that.

**Louisa Adjoa Parker** 19:13

Thanks Bella. Yeah, it's lovely to be actually meeting you and chatting with you, I'm excited about it. Good evening everyone. And just to let you know, I'll probably turn my camera off shortly, I'm currently experiencing chronic back pain. So I'm standing up at the moment. And so, in terms of my creative practice, and I said to you Bella when we were chatting about this talk that I don't necessarily know if I've always got the right to define myself as a disabled artist. So, I'm definitely an artist and I have at times defined myself in that way but I think it's really interesting because it's such an umbrella term, it can be so many different conditions and illnesses and experiences. I think that yeah, I mean at times I've definitely experienced disability. I had a syndrome for seven years and sort of pretty much house bound for a few years. And that was a real struggle with managing that with my work, that was quite challenging. But I think generally speaking, I suppose I think about disability for myself in terms of mental health and trauma, and sort of sensory overload and sound sensitivity are all of those sorts of things I lived with. Yeah so just a bit about my work, I started writing poetry really to explore my experience of living in rural areas as a girl and woman of mixed heritage and I really felt though I hadn't had a voice to talk to people about that and poetry wise it was a way in. And then I started writing fiction and history, the history of black and asian people in rural places. And then I sort of began as far as telling my own story, I began looking at ways to support others to tell their stories, and I've been quite proud of what I've done in that area. I feel as though sometimes you just need a platform. And if I've created a platform that is able to do that and tell their story then it's really important. And so yeah, yeah, I guess that's a bit about me. I also do a lot of consultancy these days. So my actual creative practices, there's not as much appetite for learning about policies, particularly when it comes to anti racism. But a lot of the work I do, I do have an intersectional approach. I'm very conscious of all those intersecting identities and how they impact people, particularly in rural areas.

**Bella Milroy** 21:43

Thank you, that was just really a great summation of your practice. And I guess maybe we could just start off by talking about, what are the kind of implications of being based rurally within your practice? Is it significant to your practice in this way?

**Louisa Adjoa Parker** 22:04

Yes.

**Bella Milroy** 22:04

Okay. Great. Tell me a bit more about that...

**Louisa Adjoa Parker** 22:06

It depends what you define as rural. I don't live right in the middle of the countryside, I live in a small town. I've always lived in small towns, I've never lived in an urban area, never lived in a city. So I think that we don't talk enough about rural deprivation. And I think that when you have, when you belong to a

marginalised group, and you're also experiencing that rural deprivation, multiple deprivation, it can be incredibly hard. Because as we all know living in rural places and for those of you who don't, public transport is a huge, huge issue. And I remember when I was young, three children and I was a single mum and I didn't drive. So, I used to have to get the bus to get my food shopping. This is before the internet. And I'd come back and do the stage thing, right? Like leaving the shopping bags and the children's buggy and carry them a bit and then move on and then go back and get the bag. That was my reality, just to get food. So, I think that when it comes to culture, when it comes to art, if you're just simply trying to get around and survive in a rural location then there's not that infrastructure, there's not those networks, there's not that support. There's not even a regular bus. You know, it's really challenging. Just being in that place. The reality is, each barrier can be a huge barrier. I do feel quite passionately about raising awareness of the issues. People living in urban areas don't necessarily know how challenging it can be just to live in these spaces. And then if you have other identities, which also add another layer of difference, another layer of challenge then it, you know, can be really tough.

**Bella Milroy 24:00**

Yeah, and how is that? How is that kind of context, how has that emerged in your work, tell me a bit about how that kind of manifests itself in that way, or influences that?

**Louisa Adjoa Parker 24:14**

Yeah, I mean, I think I always try to draw on descriptions and places. So I love the countryside, I love nature. I don't spend as much time in it as I'd like. I'm very aware that it's really really super good for our mental health and physical health. But I'm very much drawn to it and I do describe the landscape, it's quite a lot more inviting, when I can. So I'm interested in the countryside but also the stories, the human stories in the countryside. So I definitely draw on that in my work. And I guess in terms of how it might have influenced me to want to tell marginalised voices, my short story collection, which was published last year, is very much about marginalised people in the South West. So it's very much about single parents and people dealing with addiction or dysfunctional families or domestic violence or race and so on. So I very much wanted to, you know, we have this idea that rural places are an idiom and they're beautiful and they're pretty and then I check the boxes and people go on holiday and have a lovely time and they go home. But actually the reality of living in those spaces is that there's a lot of poverty, there's a lot of deprivation and a lot of addiction. There's lots of problems you don't necessarily see on the surface before. I really wanted to try and talk about them really, bring those voices into my work.

**Bella Milroy 25:38**

Yeah, and you did that so powerfully in the project that I first encountered your work in, which is your ongoing project 'Where Are You Really From?'. Which seeks to digitise the stories of black and brown people's rural lives and celebrate the diverse histories and resilience found in rural communities. I absolutely love listening to the podcast episodes in the series and so many wonderful documentations of those experiences, an essential centralist thing really, really fantastic. And yeah, thank you for that. I loved it. Maybe, perhaps you can tell me a little bit about how that project came about?

**Louisa Adjoa Parker 26:41**

I wanted to find a platform where I could properly tell a story in a way that is appropriate to them. I was very conscious about the emotional labour involved in the deployment story. So I wanted to create a space that is hopefully supportive, and hopefully, keeps people as safe as possible. So the first thing was, I was invited to apply for a fellowship and I felt like it was very outdated tech so I thought oh, I don't know anything about that, I was a writer. So I got this fellowship and then I was able to work with a brilliant podcast maker Williams. We put together a great basis for the website and then did some

podcasts. Myself and Louise Hobson, who is my Co-Director, we basically got Arts Council funding for another project and then it was just getting more stories, more website redesigns and making it much nicer. It was just me just continuing in that space and I think the most powerful story was the story of Finn. His story is absolutely heartbreaking. His mum told me that he had been experiencing racism since he was 4, he's of mixed heritage. It was just really heartbreaking and that did get picked up by local media and then also the tabloids as well. So his story has been read by 1000s of people as well, so I felt really sort of proud that I'd have enabled him to tell the story and hopefully kept him safe. I personally didn't use anyone's surnames. I wanted to make sure they were safe, but finally decided that that's fine. And I think it was just his story that probably had quite a lot of impact on people who hadn't really thought about it. Hearing it from such a young child is quite shocking. So yeah, but more podcasts, introducing brilliant people like Maya and just working outside and thinking about my practice and yeah, it's a really really fantastic opportunity. Hopefully at some point we can get some more funding for the project. I think we still have a lot more stories to tell. Yeah, hopefully.

**Bella Milroy 29:36**

Yes, I hope so too. Is that something you're going to continue in a similar kind of format? Or is it going to follow that same similar kind of structure of those kinds of one to one interview storytelling like that?

**Louisa Adjoa Parker 29:51**

So yeah, I mean, I suppose when you find the funding, you kind of get into like taking the time so I think this time, the second time I had like an immersive audio piece, for example. For the podcasts I had more clear themes for each, so I think it's just a case of thinking about what's relevant and seeing what's going on in that conversation around race.

**Bella Milroy 30:58**

Okay, so I think we might come back to Where Are You From? I've got it. I wonder if you could...the conversations that you were having through that project, they were, you know, it felt like...I know myself when I've had similar kinds of encounters with other members of my own community where they're captured and you're able to put them in that public space and we share them. It's really powerful, I mean, you just described that feeling of that powerful feeling of being able to share something that is so hidden but is so pervasive and it's such a real felt thing. I wonder how developing the project and talking to those people, how that might have contributed to a sense of community building in connecting people, the people together, have shared experience like that? Has not been an outcome of the project? Have people found each other in the experience of racism and rural life like that?

**Louisa Adjoa Parker 32:11**

That's a good question actually, as I've kept in touch with a number of participants. So yeah, I don't know, I'm not sure. I think some people have gotten in touch with each other as a result of that. I know that the things which I mentioned before a lot of people basically offered lots of things, they offered support, they offered free festival tickets, a lot of people got in touch to pass it on to the family. And actually Beverley Knight retweeted about her story as well. A lot of interest. So yeah, I'm not sure in terms of, yeah, I don't know for sure how many people got in touch with them. I know I've kept in touch, I guess it was with the artists as well. It was quite a nice team of creatives by the second project. So yeah, I'm not really sure I suppose because the website kind of has had a lot of views and I think people have different ways of getting in touch and so there has been some sort of connection. Yeah, I guess it did. So I suppose it highlights the fact that we are a community even if it is quite dispersed, we've become spread across, you know, quite a large geographical area, there is that support there. You know, you're not alone.

**Bella Milroy** 33:58

Absolutely, yeah, I think that is an essential part of that kind of finding, finding one another in that way. I wonder what your experience of finding a kind of creative community in where you're based rurally, is that something that is easily accessible for you? Or have you had a studio? Do you have a studio? What does your local art scene look like?

**Louisa Adjoa Parker** 34:03

I'm not sure. I live in Somerset and I've not been here that long. The art scene is very dispersed, Exeter is my nearest cultural hub if I want to take part in something. I think for me a lot of it has been online, that thing of community actors, that feeling of people working towards equality. People wanting to support this practice and different backgrounds, I guess that community has been much more online than in person actually, if I'm really honest over the years. That did give me a sense of belonging. When you are in rural spaces, you might have to travel miles to go out and see a play or a go to a gig, art gallery or whatever. So it's not always the same in the city were it's very centralised, you know. The networks around you in the countryside are very different and very dispersed and very, yeah, it's challenging to feel as though you are part of something to be honest.

**Bella Milroy** 35:44

Definitely. I think it's, it's kind of, you know, kind of what you're describing about the rural image that we have, this has such a tight grip on the way it contributes to the erasure of so many other experiences. It appears to be this kind of affluent white space, where the concept of rural poverty doesn't exist and accessibility is a wholly unconsidered thing. You know, that chocolate box image you described, you know, that fallacy, it's got such a tight grip on the idea of what rural spaces consist of. It seems to seep into even the cultural components of that too. Something I often find is that kind of the way in which rural contemporary art is almost solely dedicated to kind of craft work based work, which is not at all an inherently bad thing in any way. I'm definitely not saying that. It feels hard to see reflections. I wonder if your experiences of you know, not being part of that contemporary practising or being a writer, if that has affected your ability to be able to kind of slot into those kinds of creative scenes like that?

**Louisa Adjoa Parker** 37:18

There was a pom pom thing going on where I live and that's what I first saw when I moved here and I thought that's not me and I wanted a bit more. I think, yeah, it's just challenging. New experiences. I met people who were working on creating VR, Virtual Reality. And I was just like, this is amazing. How are these people so clever? I guess that's it.

**Bella Milroy** 38:19

That's what we're really talking about, isn't it? When we're saying like, can it be more than contemporary practice? Not that contemporary practice is bad but in say, in more kind of urban or city areas, there's a variety that we don't necessarily get access to.

**Louisa Adjoa Parker** 38:33

Yes.

**Bella Milroy** 38:34

It's that variety, isn't it? With variety comes a curious nature to engage in things that, like you say, you've never ever come across before. So, yeah, it's really nice to hear that you've had those kinds of

experiences and things that are unique and different in that way. Yes, it's definitely something that I would like to explore more and try. It's that kind of again, it's like finding others in that sense, too.

**Louisa Adjoa Parker 39:13**

Yeah, yeah. I feel I've been culturally starved. I went to a gallery in London a few months ago, the Serpentine gallery. And again, it's just like being in that urban, very cultural space. It was so exciting. But it was always out of my comfort zone.

**Bella Milroy 39:59**

Yeah, and I find that a really difficult experience to articulate because I really love where I, where I live, and I find value in that space. And I guess that's why it's important to embrace the critical nature of the conversation is that it's not condemning the spaces. It's not a wasteland or whatever, it's just about that variety and the access but yeah, I totally get you on that. In kind of visiting those areas where everything is that plateau of like, everything is ready in that way. I mean, one of the things that we were talking about just before we started this afternoon, meeting on Zoom, was the nature of which throughout the pandemic more kinds of creative spaces have had to become more accessible online and I think that has triggered conversations about how we reach people in that way. But of course, quite often those conversations miss out on the fact that so many people don't have access to be online and need to go to physical spaces to get online. And that it's not this kind of seamless, remote space, you know, and, again, in rural spaces, it's even more pronounced isn't it? Do you ever feel particularly isolated? Oh, yeah. I guess you just yeah, like, how does that like, in turn, have you ever kind of considered kind of accessing the studio space where you're based? That's something that I've kind of done before, but it's not quite worked out for a number of different reasons.

**Louisa Adjoa Parker 42:00**

No, not really. I just work from home. Which is great, I love doing that. Yeah, I'm very used to working from home, that's what I was doing for years. So I'm quite used to being self motivated and somehow separating that from home life.

**Bella Milroy 42:37**

I think that in those kinds of rural environments, there's like, kind of community hubs. I always kind of like enjoy the idea that the existing infrastructure of like, say like the village sign board, like village notice board, it could be like a perfect way of like a window into existing audiences that are there rather than having to go around every house and find everybody that might well be interested in that thing. I mean, how do you, how could you imagine the idea of finding others in your local rural community that might be showing similar kinds of creative interests or experiences like that?

**Louisa Adjoa Parker 43:28**

I guess I haven't really done something like that. I have met people. I guess I do have my space that I go to, the towns that I go to. All that kind of thing where I do know people. That does seem to be mainly in Exeter and a bit in Dorset as well. Yeah, I guess. I don't really know. I think it's quite hard. Yeah, like you said it's quite challenging. Like you said it takes a lot of stuff online. There's that digital space as well. Yeah, I suppose. I don't really go out looking for types to hang around with.

**Bella Milroy 44:42**

I mean I guess I wonder if there was a kind of an opportunity to collaborate locally with others in that kind of creative scene like that, is that something that would...? You know, because that might not be something that's applicable, that might well be beneficial.

**Louisa Adjoa Parker** 44:43

Always I love collaborating, it really adds to the work when you've got multimedia projects. Yeah, absolutely.

**Bella Milroy** 45:44

Yeah and I guess that's even more reason why we need to kind of consider the importance of variety in rural creative spaces like that, because it's not only the variety of encountering different creative moments, but also the variety of people that you then come into contact with and the people that those creative artists bring it like that. It's that kind of variety rather than, I mean, I've tried to do things that kind of country shows and things like that bringing different kind of artworks in that way and it's just not been...No, I mean I'm fully ready to submit to the fact that that's just not the audience that that belongs to and that's absolutely valid and fine. I don't want to turn up and be like, why is that like that? I guess it's like I was saying it's the grip. It's the grip that those spaces have. I guess that's why the importance of like, you know spaces like LEVEL that are offering cross distance delivery within that rural location. You know, it's pretty exceptional, it's not something you come across very often. Is there something like that near by you, or is that really good place just have to be in a kind of city trip? I think you know what, I've been thinking quite a lot recently about a national database for artists in rural spaces. The only challenges about that though is how will they categorise, if i want to find a disbaled artist or a black artist, how would I find them without them being put into a box. How do we gather that information? I don't know if it's already been done, I'm sure there has been. I would just love for there to be one central place we can all go. I think that would be really helpful. That'd be a good way of connecting members as well. Yeah, 100%, because at the end of the day as well, they might have tools sharing that could go on in those, in the connecting of that. Like how I'm in a rural space. How did you find others in that same rural space or others who could share about what it's like? Yeah, you know, that's absolutely what it was. Yeah, please can we make it happen.

**Louisa Adjoa Parker** 48:24

I think doing it in a positive way that celebrates people's identity without pigeonholing them. So it's quite challenging to sort of think about which box am I going in? Say, you know, disabilities or mental health or ethnicity, or gender. I would love to see that kind of central space where people can go and find people they want to work with.

**Bella Milroy** 48:53

Yeah, definitely. I think that's absolutely, like I said, contributing to the catalogue is definitely something that needs to happen. I think perhaps that's something, that's a really good kind of recommendation, what rurally based orgs need to kind of take note of that in that sense rather than just constantly kind of bringing people in from further. It's actually recognising what goes on around those spaces as well. I mean, this is a question it might not be, you kind of briefly touched on it a bit anyway, in terms of like, the implications of your experience of mental health in a rural location. Does that affect your practice much in that way? Or is it just very interwoven and just kind of part of how you operate in general? It might not be particularly considered or particularly kind of thought about in a conscious way.

**Louisa Adjoa Parker** 49:50

I think when I was younger we didn't generally try to deal with our mental health. I didn't have a very good understanding of mental health until I sort of began recognising my own childhood trauma and doing work on that. Also, seeing counsellors and therapists, and then I worked for a health worker in the NHS and then I worked for a mental health organisation and learned a bit more about mental health



and the recovery model. I think I just began at that point to kind of almost like owning it. But accepting it again, I think that's been quite healing in terms of yeah...I talk about it now openly, I've written some articles, I've done workshops, and I just say that at the beginning of all my talks that I live with mental health conditions. I think it's really important, I think we've come a long way as a society talking about this, but not far enough. You know, there's not enough understanding and how, for example, holistic understanding how trauma and mental health impacts you physically and so I don't think there's enough reflection there. And I physically feel emotions in my body and I get ill and very distressed. I think we all can. I think there's not enough conversation around that. I also when it comes to grief, I've experienced bereavement way too many times really, in my life. The last time I lost a close friend, sorry, content warning to talk about suicide. Sorry about that, if anyone has been impacted by that. It's an incredibly tough thing to go through. Yeah, I think that when it comes to mental health, we don't sort of acknowledge bereavement. That's the part that really, you know, a lot of compassion. We have compassionate leave, a couple of days leave. And actually, it's something we're gonna go through at some point. We're all going to be impacted by it and it can really impact our mental health on a temporary, hopefully temporary basis. There's lots of aspects around mental health that we're just not that good at dealing with really as a society. It's become much more common to talk about it and own it and not be sort of, you know, afraid. I think we're, it's moved quite positively in that direction but we need to go much further. Yeah and make much more space for different nuances around neurological conditions and neurodiversity and just make space for people to have these things and to be different and for that to be fine.

**Bella Milroy 52:53**

Yeah. Do you think that there's any kind of way the rural locations within that, is there... Do you kind of consider the implications of that? I mean, I guess just on a practical level, that kind of just the access to transport and things like that. Yeah, I know myself, just like the practical things when you're not ok, when we're not doing ok is just absolutely...it's just the thing that can unravel everything. So like not having decent access to like really basic, basic kind of infrastructure like that, which is sometimes part of rural life like that. That can really massively, I mean, impact in terms of like, you know, accessing your doctors can be a lengthy journey.

**Louisa Adjoa Parker 53:43**

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. I think at the moment you know, let's be honest, there's a mental health crisis. I think that before the pandemic, we were already having a lot of problems. The young people were not getting the support they needed, I think now it's just you know, it's just, I think all over the country. I don't know, I guess I've always felt very passionately that we need to have an approach to this. We need to work with young people when they're young. So we don't then build lifelong mental health conditions. You're right about the rural aspects, there is obviously the access won't be quite as good as in cities. Also, the understanding of diversity. I had a really lovely lady give me some therapy a couple of years ago and she was talking about my experiences with racism, which is to use the word to describe coloured and that's very inappropriate these days. I went ahead and thought about it. Then the next week, we're talking about my hair, as I said I struggle with my hair. She went, Oh, can I say afro? And I said, Yes, you can say afro but actually, last week, when you refer to me with that term, that's not a term that we use anymore. She's giving me therapy but she's got no understanding of the impact of racism on my mental health. There's that, you might get lovely people good at their job but with no understanding of those different intersecting identities that can cause mental health problems or issues. I shouldn't say problems, that's making it a negative. Yeah, that can cause mental health conditions, or make them worse. So you can't just like it's not an open statement. You can't just say, Oh, I will treat this person for this without understanding.

**Bella Milroy 55:38**

Or just generally being unequipped. Which is, especially in those super vulnerable spaces like that, can be extremely damaging. So I guess, I think we're gonna round up. What I what I thought we can do for just one one last round of questions, would be before we take it to any of the questions that we might have, we spent a lot of time talking about the challenges of having a rurally based contemporary art practice Perhaps, you could tell me some of the perks? What are the things that you like about where you're based in terms of your practice? Are there any benefits to where you're based in terms of your location?

**Louisa Adjoa Parker 56:27**

Yeah of course. I like to end on a positive, that's brilliant. Yeah. I love living in the South West. I love living in the countryside. I love the space and the light. I love the beaches when I get around to actually going to the beach. I'm not that far away but I don't have enough time, but when I do go to the sea it just fills me with such an amazing sense of calm and wonder. We know this amazing planet we live on and it really helps centre me. I think that you know, these spaces are very inspirational for artists. I mean, for example, where I lived for many years, lots of visual artists, really inspired by a particular light in the sky. This light over the bay which is just, it's just stunning. So I think that these spaces can be very inspirational. They can be very healing as well, I think. Having the countryside around you, having the trees and nature you know, can really help us as humans make sense of who we are. And I think my sort of journey creatively has been trying to just pull some of these stories together, people who have not traditionally had their stories told in these amazingly beautiful spaces. So yeah, of course, there's absolutely positives about living in rural areas. You know, I'm glad I brought my kids up in this area and yeah, they have lots of freedom and running around, some fresh air. So yeah, it's definitely something that has inspired me, I think with my writing as well. Yeah.

**Bella Milroy 57:55**

It was really lovely to hear that and I'm really nice, really nice way to kind of end up before we open up if there are any other questions. Okay, I just want to say before we do that, thank you so much. A lot of those questions were really generous and to share those kinds of quite intricate parts of your practice and your experiences of rural life.

**Louisa Adjoa Parker 58:17**

Yeah, you're welcome. It's been lovely chatting to you.

**Bella Milroy 58:25**

Thanks, Louisa.

**Level Centre 58:27**

Thanks Louisa and to Bella for curating Further Afield. In terms of questions, what would be some sort of key strategies you would recommend to disabled rural artists and creatives who want to get involved in their local scene but perhaps don't know where to start? Where would be a good place for someone to start?

**Louisa Adjoa Parker 58:46**

That's a tricky one. I think it is about building those networks and it's about you know, I have made friends and connections online. So that can be a good place to start. Although, I do feel as though recently, social media has become a lot more challenging and it can be quite toxic. I do think in terms of

connecting with artists, it can be a really good space. You can still see what local groups and what's going on in your area and join those groups and just chat to people. And then yes, it is a challenge, isn't it? So how do you get to know a person who might introduce you to the next person. So yeah, I think online is a good way to start and, you know, it's about sort of just finding out what groups are out there. Go to some events, you might see things going on at the village hall, art events and so on. So, I suppose it's trying to get out when you can and accessing things physically, but also looking at those opportunities online and just sort of being... just putting yourself out there in terms of sharing your practice, sharing what you're doing, sharing your art or sharing your writing or whatever it is you do. If you've got an exhibition or go to an open mic night, getting yourself out there to meet people that way as well. For me, it just takes people actually physically around me, I do feel as though I have got to know artists that way.

**Bella Milroy** 1:00:27

Yeah, I would definitely say online is a really really fantastic place to start in terms of that kind of community finding, community building like that. I mean, so much of disabled experiences, regardless of location, are universal in terms of the barriers that come with that. And so that kind of tool sharing you can apply that lens to that rural space and find that work in that way. I would also say that sometimes the space is even the kind of bigger, more widely known spaces, if it's the big venue just in your village or something like that. It can become quite intimidating to think that they wouldn't want to talk to you about something interesting that you have an idea about and that can be for really large scale organisations, big NPOs and that kind of thing. The reality is that they don't know everybody and they often have quite a lot of time to have those kinds of interactions with people that have interesting ideas. And if you've got a cool idea that you think people are going to be interested in, you know, ask a venue, ask an organisation, ask the kind of group that you think might be interested in helping put it together and it's kind of asking those questions. Sometimes it's like, the emails that sit in an inbox for like a year, and then they like, they get some older members back and then they get brought up in that way. Sometimes it's the things that you think have never led anywhere can then all of a sudden, you know, sometimes years later, this actually happened to me that's, it's one of those ways that kind of works out. It's just kind of those small interactions with people that might lead to bigger conversations, that might lead to more interesting things and sharing.

**Level Centre** 1:02:20

We've just had another question come in. Are there any other rural or disabled artists that you particularly find inspiring? For Louisa and Bella.

**Bella Milroy** 1:02:31

Do you wanna go Louisa?

**Louisa Adjoa Parker** 1:02:33

Well, I don't know where she's based but I remember meeting Abi Palmer and that was how you heard about me. We met at events in Salisbury. I guess that's not really rural but I'm not sure where she's based. I just found her really inspiring in terms of sharing her work online and workshops and stuff. I've completely forgotten her name but it was one of the other writers in an anthology I was in called 'Closure', which was contemporary short stories. I met her and she had a disability and I remember just feeling very inspired by the work that she was doing and she inspired me to get an Arts Council grant. I hadn't understood you could get one for your own plans and development, that was more than a tiny amount. She inspired me, she said yes, I've got this for my personal practice and to help me travel around and get around. It's been a long time since I saw her and she was based in Portsmouth, I know

its not really rural but I think she did struggle with the access side of things. And yeah, I always struggle with this question, I need to make a list of inspiring people. Yeah. I'll be really honest and say part of the motivation for doing this project is about like you were just saying, about how we find those of you, how do we catalogue them because the catalogue is not there. If you type in rural disabled artists, it is not that the people are not there but the catalogue and the way we find them. That's how we find those people. It's the thread between and that's what motivated us to create this programme, is finding those threads finding those people. So for people who are in the audience, you know, if you're a rurally based disabled artist who is creative or if you're interested in the arts, contact us and get in touch. We want to talk to you. In terms of like some of my favourite disabled artists in general. Rasia Kabir is one of my all time favourites, she's an incredible textile artist. Abi Palmer is one of them for sure. Romily Alice Walden is wonderful. The list is endless. I'll leave it there for some good ones.

**Level Centre** 1:05:17

We have one final question. Do you think that rural and urban artists should be working together to bridge the gaps in accessibility in the arts?

**Louisa Adjoa Parker** 1:05:27

That's such a good question. Welcome to the conversation. Absolutely.

**Bella Milroy** 1:05:37

Definitely. 100% and like the value that we can offer in terms of the value of those spaces, like I say I struggled to articulate some of the frustrations of not being based in those kinds of central creative hubs like that without feeling like I'm just kind of dumping on where I am. That's not what I want to do. Yeah, definitely connecting and collaborating with urban and rural can only lead to good things, definitely.

**Level Centre** 1:06:14

Wonderful. Thank you so much for answering those questions for us Louisa and Bella. And thank you for joining us today everyone and to Bella for inviting Louisa to the first in a series of curated conversations, Further Afield. Louisa we've loved having you with us and hearing more about your work and approach being based rurally and how it works for you and your practice. The next Further Afield conversation will take place on Thursday 27th of January 2022, also at 5:30 PM. So please save the date. I would like to say a massive thank you to Bella for developing this project, to the LEVEL Centre team who worked hard to make this happen, to Rachel and Ali for providing BSL interpretation for us today, to our very special guest Louisa and to everyone who has joined us. If you've enjoyed the conversation, please do let your friends and your peers know. It's going to be available online on the LEVEL Centre website soon. Also, if you've got any feedback for us, please email [info@levelcentre.com](mailto:info@levelcentre.com). We'll be happy to hear of any improvements and anything that we can improve to make the next Further Afield event even more fruitful. Thank you everyone. Have a lovely evening.