

Further Afield 3

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SPEAKERS

Bella Milroy, Polly Atkin, Level Centre



Level Centre 00:05

Hello everybody. My name is Emma Oaks and I am the Marketing and Audience Development Manager at LEVEL Centre. Welcome to the last Further Afield in this pilot series of conversations, created by LEVEL Centre's Artistic Associate Bella Milroy. We hope to launch the next series of Further Afield later this year, subject to fundraising. Before I hand over to Bella, and our guest speaker Polly Atkin to introduce themselves I have a bit of housekeeping, but I'd also like to tell you a little bit about LEVEL Centre for those of you who are new to us. I am a middle aged white woman with long blonde hair and glasses. I work in the office today, and it's quite warm, with the noticeboard behind me. Conversation and Q&A will last about an hour. We have two BSL interpreters with us today, Ali Gordon and Sherrie Eugene Hart. We also have live transcription and closed captions available. If you have any technical problems, just let us know through the chat function, and we'll do our best to help. Today's Further Afield is being recorded, and it'll be available on the LEVEL Centre website in the next few days. If you have any questions for Bella and Polly throughout the session, just pop them in the chat function and if we get time we'll answer them a little bit later on in the session. For those of you who don't know LEVEL Centre, we're a contemporary art centre based in rural Derbyshire just outside the Peak District. We're a National Portfolio Organisation and are supported by the Arts Council and Derbyshire County Council. We work across visual, performing and digital arts and have three Artistic Associates including Bella. We run performance and visual art classes on site and online for learning disabled adults and we also support disabled artists through our residency programme, exhibitions, conferences and performances and celebrate the art that difference makes. If you'd like to learn more about LEVEL. Our website is levelcentre.com. I'm now going to hand you over to Bella and Polly to introduce themselves, and then Bella will start the conversation. Over to you Bella.



Bella Milroy 02:32

Thank you so much, Emma. Good afternoon, everybody, it's an absolute pleasure to be with you all this evening. My name is Bella Milroy and I'm a disabled artist based in Chesterfield, Derbyshire, not far from Rowsley where LEVEL Centre is based. My pronouns are she/her. For my live video description, I am a white woman in my early 30s with an oval face and round

cheeks, I've got pale white skin, somewhat overgrown, buzz cut hair style and brown glasses. I'm also working from home where there's a grey sofa and 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 yes, welcome to Further Afield - Purpose of Place, this is the final instalment of this first three part series, exploring the practices of rurally based disabled artists and creatives. A core aspect of my personal practice strives towards better visibility and the broader cataloguing of disabled artists across contemporary art. So getting the chance to apply that to my work here at LEVEL Centre was a really exciting opportunity, one that I immediately thought of as connecting with a number of people who now have made up this programme events. The project seeks to find support and platform rurally based disabled artists and creators both on a local level here in Derbyshire, and further afield to for those living rurally anywhere. 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 creative tool sharing of disabled practices in this professional context as well. We're really interested in approaching the programme in a speculative way and some of the things that we have been exploring and continuing to explore are question surrounding what does a rurally based contemporary creative practice embody? How does this experience of disability affect or impact this? How can we affect change, take up room and promote the visibility of rurally 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 seemed more accessible? Also acknowledge the ways in which many people who fit into these categories of disabled and or artists may well not consider themselves as such. This is a space to explore the many nuances of those experiences and consider how we might well make rural creative spaces more accessible for everyone. Whilst we're also really interested in connecting with and championing disabled artists, that this project might be able to support and reach out to if you really have an interest in visibility, arts and culture, and you have a desire to connect more with your rural art scene, then this programme is very much for you. In this specific session, we are focusing on the specifics of location and the intentionality of place as disabled artist based rurally. We're going to be exploring the relevance of rural location and how it impacts creative practices based there. I am really, really, really excited for this session, to speak to Polly Atkin and explore her rurally based practice. I'm just going to give you a short introduction Polly, if that's okay? Polly has written extensively about the natural environment of her surroundings in the Lake District, where she is based, and how her experience of illness is interwoven throughout this space. This is evidenced beautifully in her latest poetry collection 'Much with Body' and also in her latest nonfiction book 'Recovering Dorothy' which explores the hidden life of Dorothy Wordsworth. I don't know if anybody caught the very first intro of this event, but I was very excited to talk to Polly about the book. So that's my intro out of the way, Polly thank you so much for speaking with me this afternoon, perhaps you could start off by just giving us a little window into what your practice consists of and some of your current things you're thinking about or work you're making at the moment.

P

Polly Atkin 06:49

Yeah, so my practice varies, I suppose. So I live in a small hamlet at the edge of the village of Grassmere in the Lake District. I like to be outside a lot although I find that quite difficult sometimes to because both of my primary conditions are energy limiting and cause a lot of chronic pain and other kind of mobility problems. My practice is very much based in place here and reflecting on place and embodiments and my experiences of those things. So just before this session, I went for a little walk up the road here, which I do most days if the weather isn't really, really unpleasant, and I get a lot of, I don't want to use the word inspiration, I suppose

source material from those those wonders. So sometimes it's just thinking about the nonhuman environment out there, the other creatures that I meet. It can be something as simple as someone was asking about a poem in my latest collection the other day, they were asking what it was about, and I had to explain that it started with finally a skull in the woods, not a human skull I should say, it was a sheep skull and the poem kind of spooled out from that. So a lot of my practice is just about noticing things and then playing on my mind in a particular way. That can be in poetry and prose as well, so I write a lot of different kinds of nonfiction, and a bit in visual practice as well. I took a lot of photographs, which partly is to help me with remembering things when I'm writing but also because I really like photography, although I'm very amateur. I like to play with other visual things as well, so during the first lockdown I took up playing with some ink and textile for the first time in a long time. All those things kind of into weave for me as part of my creative practice.

B

Bella Milroy 09:27

That was a really lovely introduction to your work. Thank you and I'm really enjoying this kind of like the different layers and components that feed into your work in the writing, those kind of visual components. That was really interesting, thank you. In your latest book 'Recovering Dorothy' you describe the process of researching Dorothy Wordsworth, which led you to live in a house just nearby where she lived in Grassmere. I guess I'd really like to know a bit more about that process. Was that your first experience of living rurally or have you always lived in rural spaces?

P

Polly Atkin 10:08

No, so I grew up in suburban Nottingham, a few miles outside Nottingham city centre in an area that was officially a village but wasn't at all. The house that I lived in for most of my childhood from the age of four, till my parents moved when I was 30 was on a main road. It is very busy main road and actually it had a large garden but a lot of my childhood place experience is punctuated by that sound of the main road being there, but and also the weird things that would happen with being next to quite a big main road as well. People would leave things in my parents hedge, yeah, lots of kind of strange stuff. So I moved from suburban Nottingham when I was 19, after my gap year, to go and live in East London because I went to study at Queen Mary University in London. I really had an idea from growing up in Nottingham that I wanted to live in a big city and get the buzz of a big city. So I looked at various places I could go and ended up with with London and I lived in London for seven years. I didn't think I wanted to leave. I thought my adult life was in London, and I really loved it. I loved all the the access to culture that you get in a big city. Then I saw a PhD advertised appear in Grassmere which happened to be exactly the area I wanted to look at, which was about place and poetry and how poetry can go towards making place but in the context of the Lake District and the context of the Wordsworths and their effect on how people think about the Lake District since they were here writing at the turn of the 19th century. That hadn't occurred to me it, I just hadn't considered a possibility that I could leave London that I could move to somewhere I'd never thought about. The PhD was based at Lancaster University and I don't think I'd ever been to Lancaster before. I haven't really been to the Lakea since I was a small child. So I ended up, with very short notice, moving my entire life from East London to Lancaster with the idea that I'd move on to Grassmere to do my field research here. It completely changed my life, it is the most rural place I've ever lived. When I first moved here though I had this vague feeling that I

was moving towards Scotland. My mom is from Dumfriesshire, so just across the border here and grew up in a village and wanted to leave that village. I'm struck every day in this rented house that I live in, that my fireplace here is very like my granny's fireplace in the house of my mom really wanted to leave and somehow I've just come full circle.

B

Bella Milroy 13:44

Oh, that's such an interesting insight, it's definitely how I wanted to frame this session this afternoon. Not just examining rurally based practices and experiences, but examining the intentionality of those spaces. How do you find the kind of autonomy of choice within that? I guess, what was it in conjunction with the your specific areas of research, which I imagine were extremely compelling in the Wordsworth Trust where you were based with that field research? Then alongside what you just talked about there about the source materials that you would come across that were informing your practice and alongside your experience of illness and how they all kind of connected together. How did that emerge to be so it's such a such a pull and resonated with you so strongly compared to East London?

P

Polly Atkin 14:49

I think it's a very instinctive thing, actually. One of the critical theorists who I turned to early on in my PhD to help me think about place was a guy called Yi-Fu Tuan who writes about something called topophilia, which is love of place. It's really interesting in terms of place studies, which are often focused on people who have a really long connection with place and that sense of dwelling you get from being really embedded in a place. The idea of topophilia allows you to have that sense of love at first sight with a place and that's very much what I experienced with Grassmere. So I came up here for my interview for my PhD in July 2006 and it happened to be in the middle of a heatwave, which may have influenced slightly too. The Lancaster University had put me up in a little hotel run by Quakers at the other end of the village, which is very peaceful and very calm. So I woke up after my first night here where it was a clear night and I was sitting in the garden looking at the stars, went to sleep and woke up with sheep bleating outside my window before my interview and had this sudden, overwhelming feeling that I had to get this and I had to move here or I didn't know what I'd do. It suddenly just came over me and it was like a kind of love at first sight feeling. Luckily I did get the PhD so I did move here and it changed the entire centre of my life. So I often joke to people that I moved to the Lake District by accident. I didn't think that I was moving here. I didn't think I was shifting the whole of the rest of the future of my life, but it's changed everything by this process of moving here at a time when I was in the middle of a period of thinking that I was relatively healthy. I didn't get my diagnosis for another 10 years after that, so went through a lot of those phases of getting quite ill and then trying to find out why. Lots of doctors telling me there was nothing wrong with me and then trying to pretend to be okay for a while. When I moved here that happened to coincide with the time for lots of different reasons, where I suddenly felt better than I had for a while as well. It kind of coincided with this moment where I felt like being in the Lake District was part of the answer, like it was fixing me. Obviously it didn't carry on doing that so there was an amount of disillusionment when I realised being in the Lake District wasn't solving all of my health problems.

B

Bella Milroy 18:08

Damn, really annoying!

P

Polly Atkin 18:10

Annoying that the nature isn't a cure

B

Bella Milroy 18:22

What's it like living in the Grasmere? Perhaps that's too big of a question to go into in terms of the stark differences it might have been when you first arrived. When you're impacted by illness and disability wasn't as great as it is now or has been. Tell me a bit of how it impacts and affects your work. What are some of its benefits and some of its strengths in that respect?

P

Polly Atkin 18:50

There are amazing benefits and now often when I go back to cities, and when I visit other cities, either if I go back to London, or if I visit other cities for work, I'm really struck by how much of a disabling environment I find cities actually. The amount of walking that you are expected to do between places and I don't know how I would have coped with the downturn in health that I had, if I had still been living in London. I can't imagine how that could have worked. There are difficulties about dealing with my illnesses, I have to have regular hospital appointments. That's problematic in a rural place. Half of my hospitals are actually outside the county here so they're not even in Cumbria. Some of my treatments I can go to Westman in general, which is 18 country miles away, which is 45 minutes to an hour's drive. Or sometimes I have to go to Barrow which is at least two hours drive, pretty impossible to get there on public transport if you needed to. Or sometimes at the Royal Lancaster infirmary, which is an hour or so away. Public transport takes at least two hours. So that's difficult and the fact that those are regular appointments for me, does put an extra problem in there. On the other hand, I have the best GP service that I've ever had. All credit to my GP they actually got me to diagnosis. So they're the people who persevered with me enough to get me to that point of getting my diagnoses. Without them I'd still be getting iller and iller and not know why. So that's an extraordinary thing, and I think that's partly because it's a rural GP practice. The doctors know their patients and there is that extra layer of personal care that I think sometimes you don't get in, and obviously some people are gonna listen to this and get really angry go 'in my urban GP practice I get very personalised care'. Not all urban GP practices, but the experiences that I'd had in Nottingham where I grew up and in London, let's just say they weren't going to get me to diagnosis and failed to when I had problems in my 30s. So that's amazing. You know, they're five minutes down the road and they are fantastic. I could not fault them. So that's one of the things that actually keeps me here as every chronically ill person knows if you find a decent GP do not let go of them are allowed to retire, they're mine now. So there are these logistical problems. It's difficult to access culture sometimes. So obviously during the pandemic, I've not been going to in person events anyway. Before that often I'd have to drive quite a long way in the same way as I do for hospitals. You know, if you want to go to a gig, often you have to drive to a town somewhere else. Luckily I do drive and my partner drives as well. So it's not so difficult for us if you have to rely on public transport it's very tricky here because the public

transport is not good. Being able to drive actually allows me a lot more freedom to get around than I would do in an urban centre where you can't drive so easily to places so there's this kind of push and pull in that way.

B

Bella Milroy 23:10

Yeah, definitely. That's given us a really interesting window, a kind of glimpse into those practical considerations. Thank you. One of the things I really wanted to talk to you about again, I'm bringing up the book again. I guess that was what was really lovely about talking to the other week when we when we first touch base in preparation for this event is that so much of this programme, but the entirety of this programme is about wanting to further the catalogue of disabled artists and creative based rurality. What was so exciting about your research of Dorothy Wordsworth is that, that is what this book is doing, which is so wonderful. I think the fact that it delves so far back, that so it's so historic in that sense, it felt really rich. Perhaps you could just tell us a bit about that process. What was it like finding this great figure of disabled culture like that? What was that like?

P

Polly Atkin 24:18

It's been a long process for me. So as I say, I moved up here to do my PhD kind of on the Wordsworth's, and at that time, I was vaguely aware of Dorothy Wordsworth as a figure. I knew she kept a journal. I knew she was the sister of the famous poet William but I didn't know much else about her beyond that. Her journals were written here in Grassmere, obviously they're really famous, and they give a lot of insight into her daily life when she's in her late 20s. I realised as the years went on, that I really didn't know a lot about the rest of her life at all, and she lived into her 80s, so there's a lot of her life that people just don't really talk about. It's partly because unlike a lot of women in history, part of her life is very well documented. She documented for us herself in this journal, but that journals only kept for three years really. So there's this huge swathe of her life that just wasn't known at all, but the things that drew me to her in her early journal anyway, are the bits that I was identifying with. She's famous for being someone who goes on these really long walks and now she's been kind of recaptured by the history of nature writing to talk about her as an amazing observer of the natural world but also as this champion of women's walking, and women being outdoors. Even in those early journals, she's talking all the time about health complaints, so she's going to bed with headaches, very famously going to bed with headaches a lot. She's also complaining a lot about her bowels, and just being tired, lots of really interesting things that I was identifying with when I was a similar age to her. It wasn't until later, that I was talking to a friend of mine who's also a Romanticist that deals particularly in romantic disability studies, and she's like 'well, you know, there's these whole other journals that talk about her illness, but they're not published'. We started to plot a plan to try and work on them which never came to fruition, but gave me the idea to write some poems based on those journals, those later journals that deal with her illness. Then I had the idea that I could write this book about it and actually bring it to public in a different way, because it's an area of her life no one knows about. I think completely changes our vision of who she is, but also, as you say, places her in disability history really firmly that she is this antecedent for us that we didn't know she was.

B

Bella Milroy 27:14

Yeah, it was so powerful to read, I think in so many ways. I felt like you've captured her experience and her experience of living in a household of caring and of other sick and disabled people. You just captured it with so much respect. I felt your ferocity as a contemporary disabled artist. Really, very, very carefully crafted in like, not wanting to be like 'for godsake she's obviously disabled' but you didn't smash it at that, you know, and I think it was very beautifully crafted, in simply and delicately outlining the shapes that are so familiar to people that experiences like ours, but wouldn't be caught and wouldn't be captured by other people who just don't know what that means. Being able to historically position that and the power of seeing the contemporary relevance of how familiar some of those experiences appears. It was both amazing and heartwarming, and then also just deeply sad and painful to think that, here we are, all those hundreds of years later and it's the same kind of conversations happening around her, which has been a bit weird. I don't really get it. I don't understand why. I loved how you captured that. The transition of her being this kind of pleasant and smiling person to someone who's just fed up and not particularly happy, putting it mildly. I could go on about the rest of the book, but perhaps we should keep it focused on your practice and the rural location at the moment. In terms of this particular research of the book, does it allow you to consider this environment in a different way? How did it change your understanding of this rural location in terms of those creative figures and disability being able to be embedded into that? Did it change your understanding of that?

P

Polly Atkin 29:44

I think that's really important, actually. I think there's going to be a really long tail for me, personally in how it makes me feel to. I think nowadays particularly, you do associate the Lake District with Waynewrights, with people in outdoor gear, and people going up mountains and with a very outdoorsy culture, which can be very alienating at times if you can't do that yourself. There are times certainly, where I felt very locked out of discussions about the place where I live because it's so focused on this kind of outdoorsy, and particularly kind of peakbagging culture. To realise that actually, there's a really long history of disabled people living in the Lake District and creating in the Lake District. So one of the things I realised when I started to look into the history of the area more, is it's not just Dorothy Wordsworth, almost every interesting artist or writer who lived in the Lakes was as, they were putting at the time 'kind of famous invalides'. There was an artist, he lived down the road here he had a stroke when he was young man and then became an artist after that. There were loads of other key Victorian writers who were disabled as well. Many of them were women as well, and that's a part of like district history that's just kind of vanished a bit. It's not even really forgotten, but just kind of set aside as something that we don't really think about, and people don't know about anymore. Being able to see that history, certainly, to me has made a massive difference in how much I feel that my way of being in place here, and of creating in place here is part of this place.

B

Bella Milroy 31:58

It's amazing, isn't it, how powerful that is to? So many sick and disabled experiences feel like this hidden path that has never been tread before. It's never been seen before. It can be such a lonely experience to have to navigate. To realise that it's been a well tracked place, that these figures have been there and that they reflect their own experiences in that way, it's really,

really powerful. Do you hope that this will be a kind of jumping off point to expand upon discussions within your local creative scene? I think I remember you saying you have working creative groups with other disabled writers and things like that.

P

Polly Atkin 32:56

Yeah, there's a surprisingly large number of disabled writers now working in Cumbria as well. I suppose that's partly because there's a lot of writers working in Cumbria, full stop, but there are quite a few who are disabled and think that kind of gives it a sense of community and of that continuity of creativity, and that continuity of that history that I'm talking about too. I hope it can start to be more visible and start to be more acknowledged in ideas about what this place is and what it's about and who gets to be here, who gets to work here.

B

Bella Milroy 33:53

Definitely, I think that was definitely something that I think you captured so powerfully in the book as well, this idea of repositioning Dorothy's history in a way that totally removed the binary of her experience of being 'she was fine, and then she wasn't fine'. I think there was a part in it where you talked about this idea that we couldn't fathom the idea that she could be walking and also sick. Like you say she's positioned as this like very vivacious and busy person, doing all of these things, going all of these places, but then also being sick as well. I imagine the contemporary positioning of the countryside, you know, being associated with that somewhat extreme abled bodied person, outdoor fitness and wellness culture and that way of being. It's not a mutually exclusive thing, the things can exist together. Perhaps two things you could talk about would be the richness that you get, that really, really, really adds to where you are, and then something that you perhaps notice about it that isn't there, or isn't present.

P

Polly Atkin 35:42

Being here in particular, and being able to walk right out my door and be in a wood or be by the lake is so important to me in every aspect of my life, but particularly creatively. So that's just an amazing well of resource for me. And I love to swim as well, being in the water is one of the few places I feel vaguely comfortable. So being 10 minutes walk from the lake is just an amazing thing for me and I kind of can't imagine now not having that. One of the things that first drew me to Grassmere and when I first lived here as well, was that it is also a place where cultural things happen. So there's a bookshop here that my partner works at, which has been going for 135 years. So it's a really old independent bookshop. Some of this has to do with the history of tourism here too, but there's also a history of artists being here. There's a history of musicians and then that reflects on the people who end up living here and working here now. A lot of people are drawn to the lakes because they are creative, as well as outdoorsy and you get this kind of weird mix of people who are like really outdoorsy, but also musicians and stuff like that as well, which is really interesting to me. When I first lived here, there was an amazing contemporary poetry series here at the Wordsworth Trust, down the road from me, where they had a different poet come and read, or two different poets come and read every fourth night between May and October, which meant that I wasn't missing out on any of the kind of cultural activity I'd been used to having in London, but actually that I was priced out of in London as I was doing lots of bits of different jobs and never had any money. So being able to be here and

then go to these things was amazing. Those events don't happen in quite the same way anymore. Now, Kim Moore, another great Cumbrian poet, is running a monthly poetry series with the Wordsworth Trust, which started just at the beginning of the pandemic. So that's kind of up and started again, but things have kind of shifted and changed a little bit as things do over time. So I miss that, I miss live music, all of the things that you get more of in the city, those things are harder to access. But then at the moment because of the pandemic, I can't access them anyway. So in a way, that's changed my relationship with some of these things a bit. I used to just drive around quite a lot to go to gigs in Manchester or Glasgow and now I watch things at home online.

B

Bella Milroy 39:07

That's really interesting to capture that living hub of that place, and the people that are drawn there. One of the things that I find myself thinking about a lot is those disabled artists and creatives, living rurally or in not centralised locations, that don't have that established network to slot into. I wonder if there's like any thoughts or resource sharing that you can think about, of how people can find one another all kind of make things happen, because I think that's always on my mind of it's never a lack of the ideas of making things happen, but it's the allies that I need to do it with. It sounds like that's a real component of where you are, there's the infrastructure there to make those things happen.

P

Polly Atkin 40:10

I suppose that, that's one of the things that makes living here in particular, rather than any other equivalent village work. That it's a village but it has all these cultural ties that are pre existing already there. Which made it so much easier to kind of slot in and find that culture, although it makes it difficult in some ways to, people already doing their thing, you know, so it can be hard to find your own niche in that. I often think of that, again, thinking about the Wordsworths and thinking 'well, they moved here because there wasn't any of that stuff going on and they wanted to start it from scratch. You know, they started a cultural community that I am now still part of 250 years later' and that's really fascinating. I often think, when I'm thinking about how impossible house prices are in the Lake District and that we can't own our own home, and how nice that would be one day is 'I think do we move to a village that no one's thought about doing this in before and be our own Wordsworth? Do you start from scratch? Then you have a whole different other set of problems, don't you? I think part of the solution is always to find those communities that are already there because they will be there, they might just be scattered. They might be individuals. They might be spread out across a county but almost every area also has an artist development agency of some kind. So in the north, we obviously have New Writing North, that does a lot of support work for writers and it can help a lot with some of those literary development things that individuals might find difficult. I think in a lot of different arenas of creative life, there are different organisations which are there and can help and support you. As well as local art organisations there's always going to be somebody doing something somewhere, and you just have to find them. You know, the internet is amazing, isn't it? The fact that we can all find each other in a way we wouldn't have been able to do, even years ago was more difficult, but 15, 20 years ago, impossible! We have all this at our fingertips now.



B

Bella Milroy 42:53

I guess that's one of the really interesting things about exploring these questions in this series, of wanting to create better visibility for rurally based practices and that kind of thing, but not wanting to forget the fact that whilst rooted in in this particular geography, your practice exists beyond that in a lots of different spaces in lots of different ways. Do you strongly identify as a rurally based artist in any way? Is that an important identifier to your practice?

P

Polly Atkin 43:31

Yeah it is and it's partly because it's a large part of how I work and where I work. It affects every aspect of my work, I suppose too because a lot of my work is about place. It's linked into this site where I live which is rural, but also the conditions of work have all those pressures that you have on you as a rural artist. The fact that you do have to travel a long way to get to places, the fact that you might be geographically isolated from peers and from other groups that you might want to work with. The fact that you always have to go somewhere to get to people or bring people to you. I think what's really interesting about the growth of online events during the pandemic is that that's collapsed some of that. So, even last night, I went to a poetry reading, which was coming from the Pacific Northwest, and it was very late because it was Pacific time but I was still awake. It never would have occurred to me before the pandemic, that that could have happened, that I could be going to these events with people who are in a different timezone which happens to work for my internal timezone, where I'd never be able to geographically reach them.

B

Bella Milroy 45:07

It's understanding the benefits or the richness that can come from that slower pace and that different structuring of connectivity. The different ways in which we have to pull our bodies in different places and bring other people to us alongside of this space that we are sharing right now online. It's finding ways to be able to appreciate those for valid and real in their own way, while also allowing space for critically looking at the limits of the geographies in that respect.

P

Polly Atkin 45:59

I think there's a push and pull isn't there? There's frustrations to being a rural creative and a lot of them are practical and systemic about public transport being terrible, about lack of resources, things not coming to you. Even in the North as a whole area Cumbria often gets a bit left out of that and a bit forgotten by arts initiatives, because we are such a rural county. There's also the problems of getting to places, getting people to you, things being expensive, housing being expensive, connectivity being difficult. You know, we have okay broadband here at this edge of the village, some people in other bits of the village don't, then you've got no phone connection, there's all those kind of really practical systemic difficulties. But then there's all these amazing boons that come from it as well. I think listening to you talking about slowness there is really important that I think one of the things that makes living here so important to me is that I feel like my slowness is not judged here. In the same way as it would be in or it's not problematic in the same way as it would be in an urban environment. I can sit in the house for most of the day, then go and puddle outside for an hour. And no one's kind of going well, why aren't you at these six events this week?

B

Bella Milroy 47:42

Yes! I imagine because the environment is a destination, in itself in a such a culturally valid way, that the idea of you having a wonder at two o'clock in the afternoon, it's not like why are you not in the office or why not? Emma I wonder if we have any questions before we finish.

L

Level Centre 48:17

I have here a couple of questions. So one is, you've talked a lot about having a specific reason for being in your rural location. Is there any other rural location you would enjoy exploring, living in or simply recommend?

P

Polly Atkin 48:31

Oh, yeah, definitely. So some of my favourite places, I have definite kind of favourite pockets of the country, which it completely my own biases and it's nothing to say that these places are better than others. So South Devon around Dartington and down to Hope Cove are really special places to me for long held family reasons. There's lots of the Southwest that I really love as well. Other places for me which are important, my eldest brother lives in St Andrews in Fife, and the whole of the East of Fife is just so beautiful. Again, such a lovely and such stunning lights. Absolutely extraordinary light that you get there and some really beautiful beaches as well. I'm also a little bit in love with Argyll and Bute as well, where again, there are some beautiful beaches, beautiful woodlands, but a bit quieter than some other places. Especially then say the Highlands where again, you have kind of equivalently beautiful beaches, but 10,000 tourists going and annoying the locals. Similarly Galloway as well, Galloway is really really beautiful and really quite quiet. There's people again going to be listening to this going well it won't be quiet if you keep telling people.

B

Bella Milroy 50:19

Are you familiar with any of the creative teams and any of those places?

P

Polly Atkin 50:23

Yeah a bit. Galloway is great, there's amazing things going on. So obviously this Wig town in the big town Book Festival and a lot of artists practice going on around there. Dumfries and Galloway is a very artists rich County. There's a great artists Centre, which does some really good things. Outreach across the whole county so there's these little pockets of activity and also more affordable places to live. I often think I'm a big cross with myself for falling in love with the Lake District. It kind of keeps me in a place which is unsustainably expensive when there's all these other places I'd love too, but would have to wrench myself up in order to move.

L

Level Centre 51:25

One other questions. What do you think are some of the key aspects of successful rural creative art scenes and do any examples come to mind?

P Polly Atkin 51:36

Really good question. I think for me, that it has to be really embedded in the community, with people who work and practice locally. So I think there's a lot of rural, based isn't quite the right word, rural attached initiatives floating in and they're actually a load of people from a city who come down and kind of plunk the initiative into the rural place, and that never really works out well. It doesn't sustain because you need that local collection to sustain. I think there's there's loads of organisations who work really well with people actually in a place with that sense of outreach. Bella I'm sure you have loads of ideas on that.

B Bella Milroy 52:40

I completely agree that local embeddedness is essential, otherwise it does just like you say becomes this kind of satellites feature. I'd be interested to know the differentiation between the artists and the rest of the village or if there is a clear distinction or should there be? I think that's always a really interesting component when we think about local, is the relevance of it to everyday people of which contemporary creative spaces are not familiar or comfortable perhaps.

P Polly Atkin 53:33

I think that's a really good point. I mean, there's a lot of really great arts organisations in Cumbria and in working in really different kind of genres and media. There's some great ones like Barrow, there is Signal TV and media in Barrow that do great stuff. There's the brewery Art in Kendall. There's loads of great centres that really try and kind of bring people together and there's also a Cumbria arts and culture network that meet online every week at a time which is unfortunately inaccessible to me, but useful for other people. To kind of keep that sense of community going and across our very spread out geography too. I think that's really important. But there's there's almost anywhere I think you can find like pockets of people doing amazing stuff but sometimes they're not immediately visible from the outside, I guess.

B Bella Milroy 54:43

I think geographies are always that. I came across somebody just through a friend, I think was just yesterday, that was from just down the road from me that I had no idea that they were and I've known that person, just through online work for a while. They're not based there anymore, but it's just, again, that kind of understanding the way in which geographies and the relevance of that can kind of pop up from time to time and then that way of connecting through that shared relationship is quite fluid.

L Level Centre 55:16

We've got time for one quick question. As well as attending online events, do you do poetry or literary readings online?

P

Polly Atkin 55:26

Absolutely! Tonnes of them at the moment. Most of them have been averaging one or two online events a month. So I've done quite a lot with both recovering Dorothy Wordsworth and my second poetry collection. Both came out last autumn so I've done quite a lot of online readings and talks with those which has been really fun.

L

Level Centre 56:03

Brilliant. Thank you, everyone. It's been a really interesting conversation that last hour has really flown by. We've really loved having you with us and hear more about your work. A big thank you to Bella for developing the Further Afield project, and to our guest speaker Polly and to Ali and Sherrie for providing the interpretation, the LEVEL Centre team behind the scenes and everyone who's joined us today online. If you've got any feedback about today's session, if you want to drop us an email are address is info@levelcentre.com. We'd love to hear from you. I think that's it. Have a good evening everybody and I hope to see you again soon.