

With For About 2024: When words fail

by Listener in Residence,
Uma Breakdown



Image credit: Uma Breakdown, 'when words fail', illustration, January 2025.

1. Physical and temporal intervals

As Listener in Residence my job is to listen, then formulate a response to With For About: When words fail. I am writing my response from my home in Gateshead, about 140 miles from The Shakespeare North Playhouse, with both ends of that journey being satisfactorily equidistant to the Pennines. It's also about a week after the event that I start working up this account from the notes I made on the day. Physical and temporal intervals are going to be important to this account, so I'm just marking that from the start. I'm also going to tell you that I'm breaking a long-term writing rule of mine, which is "don't write about your personal situation". In order to write about difficulty, I need to put my difficulty on the line to situate it, or else I'd just be appealing to abstractions. There's no 'superposition' of a disembodied Listener in Residence; the person listening is a person. A key part of the day will revolve around the need for an interval beyond the performance of "professional", so I'm trying to be brave and treat this document as such a space where experiences can be accounted for.

Upon arriving at the arts centre where this year's event takes place one of the first things I do is find somewhere quiet to ground myself. The easiest to identify option is outside in the Sir Ken Dodd Performance Garden. This is a wonderful open air theatre space with tiered seating that leads up to the first floor. It's a slightly chilly October morning but the sun is out

and I'm glad to have the opportunity to take off my KN95 mask.

2. Sidestep

I was invited to take on the role of Listener in Residence because of my background and experience around inclusive practice and safer space. A very important part of what makes spaces inclusive and safer in the last few years has been information around and responses to Covid 19.

Measurements for the pandemic have been difficult since the end of widespread reporting. One of the most thorough readings is the Office for National Statistics' Winter Infection Survey, with last year's results starting in November 2023 at 1.5% before reaching 4.2% or just under 1 in every 24 in December of that year. ¹ 2024's Winter Infection Survey will not begin for another month, but the general barometer that is the number of my friends reporting infection is enough to remind me that it's around.

A combination of neurodivergence and the long-term effects of medication mean I have difficulty with information processing as well as issues with my memory. When I caught Covid in January 2023 these cognitive functions took a further hit that lasted the rest of that year. Recovery time and that long term impairment lost me work and vastly slowed my turnaround time on what I was able to keep. As a freelancer,

like a significant percentage of those that work in the arts², and 13% of the workforce overall³ I am ineligible for statutory sick pay so lost work is just that, lost.

I'm aware of how inhuman it is to talk about anyone, including myself, in these alienated terms of labour-power, but with the UK-specific cultural fatigue at acknowledging the prevalence and effects of Covid 19, reducing it to statistics seems like one of the few ways of reaffirming its reality. I'm also aware that I am not speaking about people who are now restricted from accessing spaces due to their "at risk" status. On the train down from Newcastle I'm seated near two other people in masks, one in a headwrap is being helped onto the train by the other.

So, at With For Without: When words fail, I keep my KN95 on, note the solidarity of four or five other attendees with the same. As the Shakespeare North Playhouse was built after 2020 I had hoped to find air filtering and ventilation⁴ information on its website but I was not able to locate this. I think about how in the US masking appears to have stayed more commonplace. With mixed feelings I've noted how in the absence of oversight, this has largely been driven by communities looking after themselves and each other. One of my favourite bands – DeerHoof – is touring (another precarious self-employed role in the arts), and has asked attendees to mask for their shows⁵, and for other artists' indoor shows they might attend. The response in the

comments is overwhelmingly supportive. In the absence of any government guidelines around this kind of infection limitation, I would like to suggest that as with so much, the answer is in community solidarity (of people with disabilities, of precarious workers, as organisers of such events etc).

3. Return

It's beautiful outside in the Performance Garden. I'm waiting for the grounding activity to start, and making some notes, feeling good about all the sensations felt through my body from sun and clear air. I feel very grounded already. I'm joined soon after by artist and mental health practitioner Fox Irving⁶ who will be leading this exercise. We talk about how being a 'professional artist' generally means managing multiple strands at once. For most of us, that term denotes an assemblage, juggling lots of roles and intra-institutional relationships at once.

It means we're often without a clearly defined community that encapsulates all of what we do.

It therefore feels good to be at this event which, although it covers a range of disciplines, has a feeling of focus. At my request, Fox tells me about something they are working on, a non-hierarchical learning project called Creative Class Collective which brings together young people from formal

education to just after degree graduation, creating a peer-led community of art/support that bridges some of those notorious points of uncertainty. If we want to think about safer spaces, perhaps it's from things like this that we can learn the most. A diverse community with a breadth of experience that is diverse in united and organised around a specific practical focus and aim.

Fox heads down to the front of the stage as people start to come out for the grounding exercise. The chill is still really refreshing in the sun. I'm reminded that when I used to work in a PMLD class at an SEN school we started every session by stretching and checking in with our bodies. Reminding all the different parts of ourselves that we are present, we aren't just a floating head. Reminding ourselves of all our capacities across combinations of these parts. This arm can reach, but this arm plus hip plus counterbalancing leg can reach further. This is a fantastic way to start the day, connecting attention to body to space to community. I feel in a really good place when we leave the Performance Garden and file back into the building.

4. Cockpit

As a group we all move into Shakespeare North's main performance space, the Cockpit Theatre, where the introduction to the day will take place. I've spent a lot of time

during and since the event thinking about what that space feels like, who and what (to me) it feels like it's for. The Cockpit is a two-storey octagonal theatre space, with rows of bench seating at ground floor on level with the stage, overlooked by balconies on the first floor. Importantly, the Cockpit can be configured for in-the-round, and so when the audience arrives in the space, we are seated almost all the way around the stage. This feels really nice, it's like being in a heterogeneous group rather than the hard division between stage and audience. I like theatres a lot, particularly how the design can make it so easy to forget about oneself and focus on something else, with all the architecture shaped to support that focus. The Cockpit is wonderful for this, and particularly appropriate a space to introduce the day.

At the front of the stage are BSL Interpreters Pierce Starre and Mark Hetherington and behind them are Chief Executive Patrick Fox and Learning Producer Dr. Emeri Curd who introduce Heart of Glass and today's programme. This is almost Heart of Glass's ten-year anniversary, and I think it's both a valuable process and a commitment to progressing social and collaborative practices that this annual event has been a point of reflection over that time. Patrick stresses that today is not a showcase, which again, like the theatre's layout, emphasises a collective dialogue. There's also a mention of dealing with crises. This is the beginning of a very important thread that I will notice being picked up throughout the day by various speakers. This thread will be regarding the complexity

of how art which borders on social structures of support, relates to other such structures. For example, those that are/were/should be delivered by the state. Patrick expresses concern for how, "broadcast has replaced curiosity", and poses the rhetorical question of "what tools can we draw from to become unstuck when words fail?". I like these images a lot, and they seem particularly apt for this theatre space which creates such a strong sense of collectivity.

Next Emeri talks us through some of the material that has been left on our seats to use through the day, such as the publication Gravity Express⁷ by Kate O'Shea and Dr. Ciaran Smyth which introduces the concept of 'Socially Engaged Art Heartbreak'. Kate's SEA Heartbreak feels to me like a framework of permission to question and to have emotions around work. It feels like another tug on the thread mentioned above that highlights the many points of contradiction we encounter as practitioners. Emeri contextualises Gravity Express alongside a Heart of Glass commission report from last year: Compassion over Competition.⁸

This report, which was researched by Amanda Smethurst and Sarah Boiling, examined the contemporary context of art and community workers in the present climate and identified the need for spaces outside of competition and alternatives/recourse to hostile work environments. It's clear that this report feeds directly into With For About: When words fail and makes me think of the many other projects that I, like

most freelance art workers, am fielding in parallel to my role as Listener in Residence. In one of my other roles, I am supporting some early career artists on a programme of professional development. Something that became clear early on was the need for contexts where these artists could come together without feeling the need to perform. Performance here is primarily the professional presentation of one's practise and by extension oneself. The nature (and precarity) of freelance work means that it's difficult to feel safe enough to not perform. This extends even to contexts where performance seems contradictory, such as taking part in a workshop or sharing particular struggles and concerns.

One is here to take risks and to share failure, and yet it's hard to silence the voice that says "if your struggles are really interesting, this might be an avenue to some work..."

In my other role, we established a habit of closed-door sessions, where whenever needed, space is given for the artists to come together with no one else present. No curators, directors, public, and no one from within the organisation running the programme, including myself. This allows some of that perceived obligation of performance to diminish, hopefully. I say "hopefully" because I'm obviously not present, and I try to make a point of not asking specifically about what happens in those spaces, so the group only needs to think in terms of itself. The artists have written closed-door sessions

regularly into the programme, which I understand as evidence that it has value. I also try to stress to the artists that some things can be "studio side", they can be done without needing to be shared.

Although we do need to broadcast a lot of the time, we don't need to broadcast everything, and some things have value even when they are not directly witnessed by others.

I think about that parallel role while Emeri outlines Compassion over Competition in the Cockpit. It's a warm feeling to recognise being in a place where these issues are being taken seriously. I'm looking again at the theatre's in-the-round configuration realising that rather than being entirely "on stage" we are more accurately all "behind the scenes".

5. Collective

The next three parts of the schedule also take place in the Cockpit, beginning with a conversation between Ailbhe Smyth and Chrissie Tiller. In an account of her coming to activism in the 1970s, I'm really taken by how Ailbhe stresses that the work of artists is a collective one that is composed of both action and dialogue. These are framed not as separate but as part of the same processes, drawing on the Latin origin of "conversion" in "ad conversus" meaning "to turn", as in, "to

turn to the other". Against this, Ailbhe places Michael D. Higgins' call to "place ourselves in the space of the vulnerability of others".

Dialogue here is inseparable from affect and empathy; it is both bodily and the act of creating a space. The space created when a group turns toward one another should be an interval rather than a fixed position. The shape of the space will change as it turns to include others, not a fortress but a creative chaos and disordering of the world.

Ailbhe proposes we think of hope not as a noun, but as a verb. It is an action, decision, and choice. She ends with a final note, stressing the importance of learning how to play.

Play means a lot to me and when I hear it mentioned here - it recontextualizes a lot of what has been said previously. Like art, it's a word that is stretched over too many things, many with contradictory politics and intentions. With play though, one way through the mire is with the tools, practice and theory of Playwork, which, taking the cue from Ailbhe, I feel can be turned back to, helping us through the mire of art. Playwork⁹ is, I believe, one of the most revolutionary and subversive frameworks that is able to exist in plain sight because of the general perception that play, particularly by children, is unimportant. In the UK, Playwork originates in the Adventure Play movement which in turn can be seen as growing from the

damage to communities caused by the Second World War and the subsequent recession. An acknowledgement of class disparity, and diversity is built into the framework as it arises for the same context of inequality that Ailbhe describes as her own call to action. This is perhaps best seen in the Playwork Principles¹⁰, which whilst being a living document, has over the 15 years I've been using it always included the quietly radical definition of play as "freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated". The role of the Playworker isn't to instruct, but instead to responsively support and extend the play of the young people they are working with, as well as advocate for them when it interfaces with "adult-led agendas".

Practically, Playwork is the act of creating a safer space in which experiments with disordering the world can take place.

Those experiments do not have to be qualified beyond their own intrinsic motivation, they have value because they are being done. The frame of play is a place where we don't have to be limited to what we can explain and what we use words for; it is explicitly a place for where words fail.

6. Process

The next part of the programme is a video from artist Kate O'Shea followed by a conversation with her mentor Dr. Ciaran

Smyth. I get lost in the video¹¹, it looks and sounds beautiful. Kate talks about Socially Engaged Art Heartbreak, and it is like having something that was always present suddenly made visible.

Kate talks about how community care and self-care need to be linked, whilst also acknowledging and transgressing the border that would see personal pain forced out of the professional space.

This is an idea that will stay present with me for a while. I think about crying in bathrooms or trying to breathe my way out of meltdowns in various frontline jobs. I think about carefully editing what I say in review meetings with managers and having nowhere to put that material now piling up on the cutting room floor. I think about naively answering with too much emotional honesty when asked by HR about my history of mental illness and then vowing to never make that mistake again. Rather than the workplace model of professionalism which denies that there is a human with a role that might be called “facilitator” or “producer”, Kate reframes this to put friendship and the messiness of the personal to front. She says something that I especially like, and I write it down in my notes as “not the professional hero”. Radical friendship, and a support network becomes the main, flexible structure, and work sits within that.

I find it's very easy in professional art for relationships to slip into a unilateral dynamic of support. One person supports the other, often based on a hierarchy. If I'm running a professional development workshop with some artists, there can be a feeling that I need to park everything beyond *the process of facilitation* somewhere off screen. I've been using an access rider for years, and while my access requirements do not fluctuate much, I can think of instances where it felt much harder, a faux pas even, to introduce them to my employer. I don't think this is because those employers are unsupportive across the board, but because of this unilateral dynamic. The artists/young people/public have human qualities such as access needs, the workshop leader/institution has an all-encompassing field of professionalism which if needed can obliterate their human qualities, because the show must go on. While Kate is talking, I find myself asking if what I'm describing here is just, “bad workplace”, and I think the answer is “yes but...”. Yes, it is a bad workplace, but that badness is often obscured, sometimes even exploited by the context.

The context here being something between the fields of artwork, education work, and care work, three areas vulnerable to the commodification of emotion and a statistical focus of many Crenshawian intersections of race, class, gender, ability etc.

I like Kate's concept of heartbreak a lot. She talks about betrayal, and I like it even more. In the inhuman face of professionalism, talking about pain and being wronged is genuinely radical. Especially in a field with so little stability and security, the whisper network creates a space of relative safety. A little magic circle of human reality.

7. Quiet

It's lunchtime and people start making their way out of the Cockpit. I stay for a bit, trying to get my bearings, perched on a chair I snuck into the space earlier because my body didn't really fit the theatre's benches. After most people leave, I follow to find where the food is. I'm embarrassingly excited that it's all plant based so I can just choose what I fancy, rather than what I can eat, and the food is all wonderful. It's also kind of embarrassing that I need to use lunch and my weirdness around it as framing to talk about something else.

On the Welcome Pack for today's event is, among other wonderful things, a list of Quiet Spaces, which are on the First and Second Floor Foyers, the Learning Space, and the aforementioned Performance Garden. This is great, and it's one of the first things I looked for when I got the pack because if I'm going to make it through any event, I need to use these spaces to avoid getting totally overstimulated. Food is also a thing I've got to be careful with. Alongside my brain stuff, I've

got a GI disorder and if I try and eat while under too much stress I will guarantee about five hours of abdominal pain, which in turn makes me more stressed and so on, and so on. So, my strategy is I will eat in a quiet space. Only, uh oh, lunch is being served in the two foyer Quiet Areas, so they really aren't Quiet Areas right now. I look into the Learning Space, but it's set up for the afternoon's workshop and under bright lights, so joining the person who is already in there just feels incredibly uncomfortable. Also, quite crucially, the Learning Space adjoins the foyer, which possibly explains why it's so bright. I briefly consider the Performance Garden, but by this point the thought of carrying a plate and cutlery two floors down and out into the cold makes me feel about ten times more visible than I want to be right now so I just perch in a corner and try to be as quick as I can.

After lunch, I really need to get somewhere to self-regulate for a bit before the afternoon starts and in the absence of a Quiet Area, I end up leaving the event and sitting in the cafe on the ground floor, ear plugs in. This ultimately works fine, and I write some more notes, plotting out how I'm feeling. I feel very fatigued, and concentration is illusive. This is a normal response if I've had to be "on" in a group of people for a few hours. My nervous system gets overstretched. I think again about "messy personal", the importance of including such things in accounts like this and it's the only reason I don't immediately edit this whole section back to "lunch was great". I realise it's a lot easier to talk about including the messy

personal in the abstract than it is to actually put it down in writing for others to see. As I said before, it's kind of embarrassing. It feels like an indulgence to say, "on my breaks, I really need to be able to step away because the masking I need to do when around strangers burns me out doubly fast when I don't have a very definite role to perform, such as the unpredictable milieu of eating with quasi-strangers".

I'm glad there are Quiet Areas at this event, but I think there is an opportunity to consider again what the function of such spaces is and ask whether it's being provided. I would propose that a thoroughfare such as a foyer is not really performing the function, even if it wasn't also being used to serve food. While others will obviously have different requirements of such a facility, for me some of the key things are that it's quiet, which is both in terms of volume as well as other sources of stimulation like bright lights, movement, smells, heat. The other big thing for me is that I'm definitely allowed to be here, I can properly turn "off" because I'm doing "Quiet Area stuff" in the "Quiet Area". If the space is actually an access way to another part of the building, and it's set up for a brain-engaged workshop, it's not really giving my body the permission to turn "off". Any second someone could come in and start testing a slideshow or rearranging chairs, and who knows, maybe I'm in the wrong place! What I'm saying is, a Quiet Area is as much about signposting permission unequivocally as it is anything else. Permission to be there

and permission to not engage/perform/mask. That permission needs to be clear and unmistakable, both to those within the space and those outside. This interval of time and space can't do its job if it's unreliable.

Additionally, I think it's worth considering when a space is needed, and whether taking it away at points causes additional problems. I don't want to talk about the quiet areas in the next section so I will just highlight here that during the afternoon workshops, three of the four Quiet Areas are used for workshops, meaning that (as far as I understood) the only designated space was outside on the stone benches in the Performance Garden.

8. Paths

I get my head back in the game, and head back to the Cockpit for the last panel, which is entitled: In-Conversation: Practices of Wayfinding and Landing with Taey lohe and Danni McKenna, led by Susanne Bosch. The panel begins with an introduction around the idea of slowness. It also introduces a Q&A model where the audience can write questions on paper made into paper aeroplanes and throw them down onto the stage. I like both of these things a lot, once again the theatre feels like a wonderful, inverted space where we are all backstage.

The conversation between the three practitioners begins with the question of how collaboration might begin with a sharing of values. Danni, who is a youth worker and project manager opens by talking about the power dynamic in a collaboration between artist, arts organisation, and involved young people.

We move straight to an issue at the heart of collaborative community practice by asking “what happens when a young person says, ‘I don’t want this out there’?”.

We move on from this quite quickly, but it rings in my head for a while, because it's something so often unspoken, especially when working with young people. I feel we're talking about intervals again, gaps in language and the structure of collaboration where the thread might drop. The organisation, the artist, and the young person have aims and desires for the collaboration which overlap, but there are points where they don't and there's air between them. The value system is not exactly the same for each party.

In the situation Danni describes, there's a potential cost for the young person if the work goes ahead (potentially being embarrassed in front of their community) that is different from the cost for the other parties if it doesn't (the loss of the public outcome required by funding). Again, it's really, really good to hear this spoken about, because so often it feels like these gaps are ignored, papered over with optimism.

This leads neatly into Taey's observations about being a migrant artist and being brought into different spaces. Again, the needs of those three elements of artist, organisation, and community are not exactly the same, especially when it comes to a key point that “when the artist goes, the community is left”. The optimism of language also resurfaces when Taey points out that the word “community” is often used in a very soft way, ignoring the fact that a community might be bound together by something like racial or gender homogeneity. This can lead to potentially risky gaps between the needs of community, organisation, and artists, especially when the latter is dropped into the former.

We move on to questions, some attached to aeroplanes, some not. The collective audience and panellists talk about the importance of clear roles to help avoid conflict which bubbles away under the surface. Danni and Taey both centre clarity as a goal, and a policy of asking difficult questions as a means to establishing this. The conversation is especially refreshing as it brings so many of those unspoken gaps to the surface, even while solving or bridging them is beyond the scope of any single project.

Taey brings up the interlocking questions of “why is delivering workshops my job as an artist?” and “why is there no money for social systems to do it instead?”

It is incredibly empowering to hear this spoken aloud at an event such as this. Working as an arts professional, these questions point to a gap that I probably ignore more often than not. Work in communities accounts for about half my income, but I'm very aware that the systems that could have provided the same provisions to society have been decimated. Artists can deliver short-term Playwork projects, in the same community that 20 years ago would have had a permanent, staffed Adventure Playground that delivered week in week out what the artist does for a single weekend and also been a place of long-term community building. The question becomes, how do I do the best I can when working with the community, while at the same time not allowing a blurring of roles to take place where a permanent right gets reframed as a temporary privilege? I don't have an answer for this, but I wonder if this might be something that could be continued beyond the event.

Perhaps a question is, "how might we as artists shift from patching a gap in services, to instigating the return of those services as long-term community spaces?"

I don't know if this is our job, but I feel like I'm frequently asked to do things which give that feeling, so who knows!

9. Workshops

There's a brief break after the previous panel and before the methodologies workshops begin. I made a lot of notes as I moved between as many of the workshops as I could, but going back through them, I'm reluctant to try and describe them here. All the workshops I took part in, or listened to, were very much collective explorations of ideas and practices within the professional field of community art practice. So much of what arises then is very slow, or very quick, or otherwise elusive because it's to do with personal inference pulled from the general or incidental. I also think there's something to be said for allowing things to be just held between the people in the room, and not immediately made public. A space to try things and make mistakes. Curiosity rather than broadcast. It's in that spirit of experimentation and sharing things in a private space, that I'm leaving the workshop¹² content 'behind the scenes'.

10. Launch

The final part of the day is something I've been looking forward to, the closing reading by Reader in Residence Radha Patel. She-they read a text entitled 'Notes from Aarti's Diary', which in my notes I've called "a beautiful diegetic poem about space travelling through grief". I find the reading utterly

captivating and get completely lost in listening to the narrative and imagery.

The refrain “it's not English but I understand every word” repeats throughout.

This brings to mind the subtitle of today's event, ('When words fail'), but crucially makes a sharp distinction. The general lack of language to fully wrap what it might aim for, is pulled into the political context of “English”. More than that, Notes from Aarti's Diary throws that English into the void, making clear that the language needed is something else not yet described, or something resistant to description. After the reading, Radha tells us that the text was largely revised throughout today, that ideas from the panels and talks and incidental conversation have been folded into it. It's a text that, like its in-world author Aarti, is on a journey that does not necessarily have a single path or destination. It's a reparative path, where multiple attempts might be made, non-definitive.

On my journey back over the Pennines after the culmination of With For About: When words fail, it's that last piece that reactivates a lot of the earlier ones I picked up throughout the day. The 'Safer Space' is one of many kinds of interval, but something crucial is that it is a place where things do not have to be performed for anyone else (or to any other standard) as long as they work for those present. It's also a space in

motion, where ideas can change, and mistakes can be made. An endless capacity for new versions.

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