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## Interview: Liz Crow on Figures

5 April 2015

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**'I am putting myself through this because this really matters' Liz Crow talks to Trish Wheatley about Figures, the mass-sculptural performance that makes visible the human cost of austerity and urges action against it.**

A solitary figure, almost invisible, is on the foreshore at low tide in front of the cultural complex of the Oxo Tower Wharf on London's Southbank. Camouflaged from head to toe in wet weather gear, kneeling amongst the stones, sand, driftwood and grime of the Thames, she is at work, engaged in a ritualistic task. Some passersby stop to watch, others don't notice at all, but all of them, aside from young children, will have heard of austerity, such has been its prevalence in the news over the last term of government.

Those whose curiosity is sparked tread carefully down the steps and along the shore to find that the figure is artist/activist Liz Crow. She is working on an endurance performance piece that



Liz Crow on location for Figures. Photo: Trish Wheatley

sees her sculpt 650 clay figures, in 3-hour shifts at each of the two low tides for 11 consecutive days. That's clearly a big undertaking, to be out in the unpredictable spring weather, with timings dictated by the tides. Liz describes:

"It's about being able to immerse myself in an experience and it's the durational aspect that means you can go much deeper into it and discover things along the way that are bigger than the question you started out with. I think when I refer to durational work it's also endurance work for me impairment-wise.

I'm not trying to do something martyr-ish, or the brave cripple thing, but there's something about being prepared to go deep into an experience and the struggle of that process, particularly if its about themes that really matter, that give it a chance of communicating more deeply to people.

I think if it was sunny and I just did this for a couple of hours and then it was done it wouldn't connect in the way it seems to be connecting. Through my shift into performance and durational work, I've found there's something about other peoples' knowledge of my enduring it and the process involved that seems to make them open up to the questions of the piece more deeply. We could sit in a circle and talk about the 'issues' of the piece, but the questions that it raises that people start to grapple with wouldn't be as profound doing it that way."

The statuettes each represent an individual narrative about living at the sharp end of austerity, whilst quite intentionally the group equals the number of MPs being elected next month. The work is unashamedly political, but it's definitely not party political. 'Figures' is about the human impact of austerity and aims to be a catalyst for people to think about how they express that through their vote and consider more deeply about the kind of society in which we want to live.

Liz completes a figure, humanising it with two eyes and in a short alchemical moment creates its individual character. She places it with the others that have amassed either side of her during the session. The group gazes out across the Thames to the area of London where many of the governmental departments responsible for implementing austerity are located. The figures appear to be challenging them, staring them down in a silent protest that questions the austerity approach and asks for a consideration of the human impact. Liz explains:

"Coming from an activist background I think there's lots of ways of doing activism and working for change. The more confrontational activism has a role and can be incredibly effective, but it can only do certain things, and what it often doesn't manage to do is produce an activism that's sustainable, or change that is sustained. I think there is something about Figures and the way it invites a conversation, rather

than simply saying this is the way you should be thinking, that opens up different possibilities and addresses that idea of sustained and sustainable change. For me, performance more than any other artform that I've worked in, is a space for that."

How does the work relate to disability arts?

"It's relevant in the sense that disabled people are disproportionately affected by austerity, but I actually think maybe it's more, it's the elements that seem more peripheral that I think make it disability arts. So, getting me onto the foreshore and the way that a team has had to form and work together and work with notions of interdependence that makes it disability arts more than anything else. I hadn't initially seen getting me down the steps as part of the performance, but I realise it is, because it's a space where [particular] values have to be put into practice for it to work. Those are the same values that underpin the questions that the work is asking, beyond austerity, the really deep questions like 'what is it that makes us human?' and 'what kind of society do we want to be?'. The kind of values that we have to model as disabled people, and as allies of disabled people, are the answers to those questions, so yes it's disability arts, but it's not solely disability arts."

The session is complete and 32 small figurines are packed into boxes and carried to the exhibition space in the courtyard behind the Oxo Tower building. From the outside the space is a common garden shed, but visitors flow steadily in and out, a few at a time, often leaving a comment or a drawing and staying a while to talk to the production team volunteers about the artwork. The figures are stacked in regimented lines on black shelves, which form an amphitheatre. What's the idea behind the exhibition?

"The exhibition is designed to underline the durational aspect of the work, and the idea is that the figures will amass so they will be moved across at the end of every making session. It started off with empty selves and is gradually building up to the 650. People who are going past on a daily basis will see that growing community of figures and, I hope, start to get a sense of scale and impact."

The occasional people do approach Liz while she is engaged in the performance of sculpting on the foreshore, and she is open to that. She describes one particular encounter that has stuck in her mind:

"A guy came down who we were a bit unsure of; had a can of ale in one hand and he was staggering a little bit. He clearly had significant health difficulties. He explained how he'd been to the DWP earlier in the day and harangued them about when he was going to receive some money and then he took out this yoghurt and a lollipop

and laid them out before me and gave them to me as a gift. I sort of don't know what to make of it, but actually I'm also just incredibly touched by that. It's another thing that performance can do: just open a space where maybe he felt heard and attended to by what we all [the figures production team] did. He didn't get ushered away, it was a space, and it was a safe space for me, but also it became a safe space for him, maybe? I don't want to overplay it, because I don't know what's in store for him or what he'll do with it but I just think there are some times in life that can take a little thing that starts a shift, so something could happen next that could just build on that. Who knows?"

Making an impact on an individual level and a societal level is a big challenge. Liz says 'I am putting myself through this because this really matters'. One can look at this work and simply enjoy the aesthetic qualities, but it's really understanding the socially engaged practice, the endurance and the politics and messages of the work that bring it to life with a deep passion. I would urge anyone who is able to get to the Southbank to visit, and anyone who is not to follow the social media streams that accompany the work.

'Figures' live sculptural performance with Liz Crow continues at every low tide until the morning of Thursday 9th April. The exhibition is open from 10 – 6pm everyday until Thursday. More details available at [www.wearefigures.co.uk](http://www.wearefigures.co.uk) Join the conversation on Twitter [@WeAreFigures](https://twitter.com/WeAreFigures) or on the [Facebook page](#). Stunning images of the project as it progresses via [Instagram](#), or short videos via [Vine](#). The hashtag across all social media is #WeAreFigures

Figures has been made possible with funding from Arts Council England and Awards for All.

## **Trainee Producer Alice Holland talks about the Figures exhibition**

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Marion Fallon / 5 April 2015

Thank you so much for doing this Liz, you have my admiration for your insight into Austerity and how it's hurting disabled people. I don't always "get" modern art and art forms that aren't looking at a painting/drawing, but something about this speaks to me and I think and hope it will engage other people too. I am an online and sometimes in person activist, I'm sometimes held back by physical limitations, fatigue etc., and as you say, it does have a role (a big role in my view) but it's not the only way and you can't always delve into the real "heart and soul" of how people are being affected and damaged by what's being done to them. I am someone who loves words and uses a lot of them, but even I sometimes lose the ability to really describe accurately what's happening and what it's doing to my soul, my very being. I hope that the WeAreFigures will help with this and think it will be a valuable tool, for yourself and other groups. Marion, Norwich

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