Bedding Out: Art, Activism and Twitter

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> @RGPLizCrow Against disability lies and myths, I will be defiant and disobedient from my bed. Come and join me – it's no fun alone.

The main part of this essay features extracts taken from a two-hour interview between Liz Crow and myself conducted on the 1st February 2014, in the wake of her touring performance of *Bedding Out.* Created and performed by Liz, *Bedding Out* (Ipswich Arts School, November 2012, Salisbury Arts Centre, April 2013 and Edinburgh Fringe, August 2013) was a live durational performance piece that took place over 48 hours. Taking to a bed (see figure 1) in the centre of the performance space, Liz sought to draw attention to the usually hidden aspects of her life in order to bring to light the complexity of her lived experience as a disabled person.

Figure 1: Image of Liz Crow lying in a wooden bed, centre stage, surrounded by six people, one of whom is speaking into a microphone. Still image from Liz Crow's *Bedding Out*, Salisbury Arts Centre, April 2013, reproduced by kind permission of Roaring Girl Productions.[1]

The performance took place in the context of the then UK Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government's austerity agenda and the massive overhaul of the benefits system and changes to support and eligibility criteria for disabled claimants. Formed in 2010, following the general election in which neither the Labour Party nor the Conservative Party managed to secure an overall parliamentary majority, what came to be known as the ConDem coalition promoted an austerity agenda. Presenting the previous Labour administration's commitment to public spending as profligate and responsible for a culture of welfare dependency, the ConDem coalition promised to cut the budgetary deficit, the significance of which was amplified by the global economic recession, and to cut public spending which was presented as 'out of hand'. In a speech in 2010, Iain Duncan Smith, the government minister responsible for the administration of the benefits system at the Department of Work and Pensions, described his remit as one of fiscal responsibility ('We literally cannot afford to go on like this') and in terms of a moral obligation to get people 'parked on inactive benefits' back into work.[2] What followed was a series of massive cuts to the welfare budget, alongside broader cuts to public spending and changes to the benefits system including the introduction of sanctions so punitive that, for example, a man who had a heart attack during a Job Centre assessment was sanctioned on the grounds that he had 'withdrawn' from the interview.[3] The cumulative effect of these changes for disabled people is as the centre of a number of campaigns including the work of DPAC (Disabled People Against the Cuts) and the WOW (War on Welfare) campaign for a cumulative impact assessment of welfare reform for disabled people.[4] Despite a series of scandals around the numbers of deaths amongst disabled and ill benefits claimants deemed 'fit to work', evidence of the fabrication of documentation at the DWP, and indications that the UN is planning to send a special rapporteur to the UK to investigate whether welfare reforms have caused "grave or systematic violations" of disabled people's human rights, Iain Duncan Smith remained committed to making further changes up until his resignation and volte-face in March 2016.[5]

The overarching aim of *Bedding Out* was to challenge the ideological legitimation of austerity and benefit cuts in the rhetoric of cheats, scroungers and skivers encapsulated in Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne's speech to the 2012 Conservative Party Conference in Birmingham. Here Osborne called on "all those who want to work hard and get on" and asked:

> Where is the fairness, we ask, for the shift-worker, leaving home in the dark hours of the early morning, who looks up at the closed blinds of their next door neighbour sleeping off a life on benefits?[6]

The rhetorical assertion of a stark distinction between strivers and skivers, hard-working families and those on benefits, continues to structure not only debates about welfare in the UK but also mass cultural representations of benefit claimants in so called, 'poverty porn', reality shows such as *Benefits Street* (UK, Channel 4, January – February 2014) and *On Benefits and Proud* (UK, Channel 5, October 2013). This contemporary iteration of what is essentially a much older nineteenth century cultural discourse of the deserving and undeserving poor (O'Hara, 2015) has had powerful effects, not least in placing the question of whether a disabled person truly deserves state support at the centre of political and cultural debate. The consequence of the kind of language of scroungers and cheats has produced a kind of constitutive suspicion of disabled people that finds its apparent evidential veracity inscribed in outraged *Daily Mail* headlines. 'Benefit cheat who pocketed £100,000 by claiming to be wheelchair-bound for TEN YEARS is caught hula dancing on holiday' (*Daily Mail*, 19.08.12) or 'Benefits cheat who said disability made him a 'hermit' suffering panic attacks when he went outside took 19 luxury cruises after falsely claiming £68,000 (*Daily Mail,* 01.09.15). However, actual levels of benefit fraud (across the entirety of the benefit system) in the UK are very low at 0.7%.[7]

It is in this context that *Bedding Out* set out to offer a counter narrative to the logic of 'austerity speak' and its consequences one of which is arguably a significant increase in disability hate crime in the UK. (The Crown Prosecution Service reported a 213% increase in reported cases of disability hate crime between 2007/8 and 2014)[8]. In so doing, Liz invited members of the public to join in with a range of bedside conversations. Crucially in the context of this collection, the conception of *Bedding Out* placed the potential of new social media, specifically in this instance, of Twitter, in conjunction with continuous livestream, at the centre of its exploration of the human consequences of austerity and changes to the benefits system for disabled claimants. Each performance set out to open up a dialogue between Liz, her audience and Twitter users. These conversations were not ancillary elements or supplementary extras but part of the performance itself. *Bedding Out* thus gained its energy from the temporal immediacy of Twitter and its capacity to generate and record multiple responses in real time. As such, the piece raises some important questions both around the ways in which the integration of new social media potentially transforms the ways in which we conceive of the arts based political activism, the politics and ethics of artistic practice and the capacity of both to effect change in the world.

Twitter, Art and Activism – some preliminary reflections

Making sense of the political dimensions of Twitter in relation to social activism and, more particularly in this instance, to an arts-based disability activism is not straightforward. Despite Manuel Castells' (2012) compelling celebration of 'networked social movements' throwing off the shackles of 'economic distress, political cynicism, cultural emptiness and personal hopelessness' (p.1), this kind of utopian investment in a virtual sociality fails to acknowledge the more complex and troubling convergence of democracy and capitalism in networked communication technologies (Dean, 2010). Van Dijck (2013) cautions against the fallacy of conceiving of 'platforms as merely facilitating networking activities' and of conflating 'human connectedness' with 'automated connectivity' (p.13) particularly in relation to the commercial interests that underpin the development of platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. As he notes, 'social media services can be both intensely empowering and disturbingly exploitative; sociality is enjoyed and exercised through precisely the commercial platforms that also exploit online activities for monetary gain' (p.18).

The imbrication of social media platforms with the monetising logic of late capitalism must therefore circumscribe the political optimism expressed by scholars such as Castells (2012), Papacharissi (2010) and Jarvis (2011). At the very least, it raises some important questions about the ways in which we might understand the role of these communication technologies in relation to the public expression of new forms of sociality. Van Dijck points to the process by which the boundary between the public and private has been increasingly elided; 'utterances previously expressed offhandedly are now released into a public domain where they can have far reaching and long lasting effects' (p.12). If, this, on the one hand, subjects tweets and status updates to the regulatory and potentially punitive gaze of governmental surveillance mechanisms, then equally as insidious is the extent to which these platforms facilitate the incursion of the market into every aspect of life, even monetising affect and affective labour itself (Hardt and Negri 2000).

The erosion of the very idea of private space in tandem with the sense that there is no longer any 'hinterland' or space outside the logic of capital (Jameson, 2005), has particular implications for disabled people in the specific context of the decimation of the welfare state and benefits system that we are witnessing in the UK. George Osborne's image of the closed curtains that must be torn asunder to reveal the previously hidden body of the slumbering, benefit claimant suggests that one of the conditions of state support is an acceptance that one must also relinquish any right to privacy, autonomy or choice. In other words, the ideological conflation of the concept of value with economic participation through 'hard-work' and employment produces those whose quality of life and wellbeing is contingent upon additional support as essentially parasitical and thus profoundly vulnerable. This is the kind of thinking manifest in the preference utilitarian Peter Singer's support for the killing of disabled infants on the grounds that they will only ever 'take' from the available social and economic resources (Singer, 2001). Thus, we see disabled benefit claimants being subjected to increasingly intrusive and humiliating strictures and interventions including the use of forms of surveillance encoded in the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act (2000) as a means to reveal 'benefit fraud'. Alongside this, the Department for Work and Pensions' 'Help to Work' programme demands a daily visit to the jobcentre or an enforced period of unpaid labour; disabled, chronically and terminally ill people must prove that they are unable to work; and anyone who misses an appointment or turns up late is sanctioned and thus impoverished for a designated time period.

In this kind of environment, the transformation of 'casual speech acts' into 'formalised inscriptions' (Van Dijck, p.7) and the merging of private and public communication on platforms such as Twitter is not without its risks. As @Kewryta noted, 'Ooh, sneaky spying time! Hey Liz just smiled. Disabled people can't smile. Faker!!!'. Although clearly ironic, the tweet encapsulates the degree to which disabled people are currently subjected to constant scrutiny within a narrowly defined conception of what disability means and how it should look. In the interview below, we discuss some of the risks inherent in the project in the context of notions of public and private space and public and private selves in relation to the current austerity agenda.

It is also important to note here that the assumption that social media platforms are inherently democratised and democratising spaces of 'autonomy' (Castells) also occludes and arguably reinforces an unacknowledged but constitutive able-ism. In other words, if technology is inaccessible, then the possibility of the active participation and representation of disabled people is precluded from the outset, thus re-inscribing social marginalisation. Goggin and Newell (2003) have described the systematic exclusion of disabled people from the apparently 'friction free' 'utopia of cyberspace' (p.11) and emphasise the regulatory aspects of contemporary digital communications and media technologies in determining the ways in which disabled people are able to 'access various parts of the social world' (p.10). More recently, Ellis and Kent (2011) have drawn attention to the inaccessible features of Twitter in the context of its use as a tool of political mobilization. They point, in particular, to the exclusion of people with visual impairments as an example of Goggin and Newell's concept of 'doing production', what they describe as the ways in which an 'underpinning moral order' intersects 'with technology and culture and digitally disables people with certain bodies' (p.52).

Any engagement with *Bedding Out* must therefore acknowledge the limitations of Twitter in relation to its capacity to engage everyone whose lives and wellbeing are negatively impacted upon by austerity and changes to the benefit system. There is certainly more work to be done to address questions of accessibility and participatory democracy in relation to the use of communicative digital networks not only by visually impaired people but also by non-verbal or non-literate people with cognitive impairments. However, although Twitter is not inclusive in this global sense, there is strong evidence to suggest that the performance of *Bedding Out* and the dialogue it generated had a significant impact upon Twitter participants to the degree that it enabled people to share their experiences, to connect with one another and to forge a sense of communitarian solidarity:

> @janeysian Thank you for #beddingout. I have my own 'bed life' and feel less isolated today knowing you are out there
>
> @KathyOLearyAlways good to know we're not alone #oftensufferinginsilence x

Crucially, Twitter was used in this project in the context of other means of access (physical and virtual spaces, written and verbal, distance participation included via email, text and phone) and it offered a way of engaging those with their ow bed-lives, for whom attending the live even was difficult if not impossible. It remains challenging to garner sustained public attention to the high levels of social and economic suffering experienced by disabled benefit claimants. The release of DWP statistics (August 2015) that indicate that more than 2500 benefit claimants died after being found fit for work between December 2011 and February 2014 is indicative of the structural violence that underpins the changes to the benefits system that *Bedding Out* addresses. However, the marginalisation and isolation of disabled people that this system inscribes and reinforces also make it more difficult to gain widespread, popular, attention to the devastating and often deadly effects of austerity for this group. The circulation of tragic stories such as that of the former soldier David Clapson who died, alone and hungry from diabetic ketoacidosis, having had his benefits stopped entirely for missing two Jobcentre appointments is evidence of the impact of sanctions upon people who are already in a structurally vulnerable position (*Guardian*, 03/08/14). However, these stories necessarily foreground individual tragedy, victimhood and despair to make this point rather than fundamentally challenge the neoliberal ideological framework that produces people with additional needs as a drain on limited resources, deserving (ie. tragic) or undeserving and so on. The achievement of *Bedding Out* was to refuse these prevailing conceptions of disability from the outset and to encourage participants to express the complexity of their experiences without reproducing the divisive able-ist categories that dominate current political and cultural discourse:

> @RGPLizCrow #beddingout “This is not a work of tragedy, but of in/visibility and complication” in disability and welfare reform.

The Twitter conversations combine humour and mockery of the governmental agenda and of ministers such as Esther McVey (Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Disabled People 2012-13 and Minister for State for Employment 2013-15) with important personal, emotional and political insights about the implementation and effects of the new benefits regime:

> @RGPLizCrow Have you anything you’d like #beddingout to say to ‘la la la la, can’t hear, won’t hear, and won’t speak to the disabled’ @EstherMcVeyMP?
>
> @ian_beckett @RGPLizCrow you speak for the many unlike Madam McVain.
>
> @RGPLizCrow If @EstherMcVey was here in the room, right now, what would you say to her? #beddingout would like to hear! Shout.
>
> @MisterNSandwich @RGPLizCrow @EstherMcVey I’d ask why she blocked me on Twitter. Because I challenged her ludicrous claims, or because I called her a tosser?
>
> @miltonorourke @EstherMcVey When ‘diagnosing’, what emphasis will be placed on ‘factual’ medical evidence, as opposed to Capita [company assessing PIP claimants] opinion?
>
> @leonc1963 I would ask her to be my carer for a week!
>
> @MyalgicEncephal I would ask why she implied cognitive and fluctuating are not physical.

> @bloomer71 I'd want to know why she insists on telling lies – 50% DLA claims granted without medical info? Total bull.

The humour and passion in these exchanges – the capacity to laugh and to mock – is a rejection of the abject, tragic constructions of disability that give rise to the dominant attribution of disabled people as somehow intrinsically vulnerable rather than structurally vulnerable as a consequence of austerity. The circulation of counter narratives (ie. the exposure of Esther McVey's "total bull" and the questioning of the assessment criteria) also facilitate the development of a set of conceptual and political resources with which to resist the ideological powers of the scrounger/striver dichotomy established in George Osborne's speech (discussed above). Whilst then, Twitter has its limitations, its use in this context remains an important tool in the forging of a sense of community and a shared sense of resistance amongst a constituency for whom networked communication platforms facilitate connectivity between people for whom face to face encounters are difficult. This is not to reject Goggin and Newell's emphasis on the regulatory and often exclusionary effects of apparently facilitative technologies but to identify spaces of resistance and positive political appropriation within them. The use of Twitter in *Bedding Out* is discussed in detail in the final section of the interview.

The following transcript is edited and extracted from what was a long interview between Liz Crow (LC) and myself (LB). In the interests of clarity and spatial constraints, I have excised unfinished sentences, ums and repetitions (mainly mine). I have also organised the transcript into sections that explore context, the issues of public/private selves and risk discussed above, and the participatory nature of the project. I use […] to indicate where sections have been edited or removed for reasons of relevance to the topic.

Lucy Burke

Interview with Liz Crow, Bristol, 2nd February 2014

Context

LB: What did you hope that *Bedding Out* would achieve in the initial planning stages when you were thinking about what you were going to do?

LC: Well the thing that triggered it was the newspaper reporting and the political briefings on benefit changes and this notion of claimants as being skivers and scroungers and that, you know that disabled people, if they set their minds to it could get out there and work. All the things I was hearing didn't tally with my own experience of it and my knowledge of other people's experience and I wanted to confront that. I wanted particularly to look at the idea that when people were making those judgements they were making judgements on what was visibly presented in public spaces. So if I'm aware that I've lived my life with this incredibly stark public/private divide, then clearly nobody can make a judgement about my life based on what they see of me down in the supermarket because that, that’s where I’m performing. When I’m at home in my bed, that’s where I’m not performing, that’s where I’m closest to being me – whatever that is.

Whilst that had been my experience for thirty years, the stakes were suddenly much higher because of the kind of judgements that were being made about people, the ineligibility for benefits and the very precarious positions that people were being placed in and the rise in hate crime that was being associated with it. So suddenly we were talking about something that had been going on for forever and a day but had become much more dangerous. So I was working with that idea with the bed and I think, as with all my work, I saw it as potentially being a platform for those kind of conversations to be had. What I didn’t realise, I think, was how far ranging the conversations would become, that it wasn’t simply about those versions of ourselves that we present to kind of manage our lives; it became deeper and wider. So it became about the broadest politics, it became about the sort of society that we want to live in, it even became about what it means to be human.

My work is very much seen I think as having a disability focus and I’m not convinced that it does. In my films there’s always a character who is a disabled person but the questions that arise in the films are simply about being human, about trying to find a place in the world amongst people who have to wriggle much more to find that place because the world doesn’t admit them quite so readily. And I think that some of the conversations we had around the bed and through Twitter arrived at that point, of what kind of world do we want to live in? The biggest, most fundamental questions came out of that initial assertion that you need to understand more about me even to have the possibility of judging who I am. You can’t make these sweeping judgments about a person on the basis of what they present publicly. One of the things I was trying to get across was that idea that my public self would be seen as striving […] but if I reveal that private side of me, the real risk is that it is seen as tragic. Whereas what I wanted to say is that real life is a kind of complicated mishmash of elements, of both those things but also something completely different. I want to convey the idea that life is complicated for me because life is complicated. Actually at that level, the really simple message is that life isn’t straightforward, it isn’t this or that - extremes or absolutes or binaries – it’s messy, and anybody who really looks at their own life will see that they are a mass of contradictions. One day I can do this or one day I choose to do this and I’m prepared to make a trade off and you, in public, will see me doing this physical exertion but what you won’t see is the preparation or the recovery time. Reality for me is a constant juggling and calculation of that. It keeps coming back to the thing that if I make that public the risk is that people go ‘oh yes I knew her life was awful, I knew her life was tragic’ – but what I’m saying is that it is just an awful lot more complicated than the images that we are given.

LB: But this is in the face of a set of policies that attempt to simplify and reduce complexity, that are all about tick box exercises or reducing people’s lives to passing or failing a test so it is probably very important that that’s countered and that what you do counters that. But I’m also aware that there’s risk isn’t there for you I suppose because currently if you are seen to be able to do anything then it’s ‘well, how can you possibly deserve support’?

LC: Absolutely, that’s a huge part of it and those judgements are made every day, so the risk is that you spend a lot of time justifying the decisions you make instead of getting on with the decisions you make. What you just said about the kind of criteria that are applied, they’ve brought a particular urgency – the benefits changes have bought a particular urgency - to this whole public/private thing and how we present ourselves. Because to a greater extent than previous benefits eligibility processes, they’ve relied on quantifiable factors. The form of measurement they use is akin to the form of measurement that’s used on Paralympians to check their eligibility to compete, so there are measures of what you can do, how long you can exert in a particular action, whether you have a particular range of movement. [Things that] are all very measurable but are also based on bodies that predominantly function today as they will function tomorrow and as they functioned yesterday. They are predominantly physical impairment based or sensory impairment based, but again things that you can put a number on. The reality is that if most Paralympians – not all but most - roughly fit that mould, you are talking about a different group of people who are more likely to be on disability out of work benefits. They’re the ones with the kind of nebulous, changeable, unpredictable, maybe invisible impairments that you can’t quantify and very often rely on subjective reporting because there aren’t tests to measure it. So what you find is that you’ve got a test that is completely unfit for purpose for the group of people it is supposed to measure because it doesn’t deal in the complexities of real lives, and therefore the people who need it most are the ones who are most likely to fall through the net. So it’s a system that is entwined in that public/private divide, judging a group of people on their public presentation and therefore failing to meet their needs.

LB And it’s complicated because it is a process that the government at least would present as being a fair one because it applies a standard set of criteria to measure and evaluate a group of people. So it looks from the outside as if it is doing all those things that seem to be fair.

LC: Yes and what I’ve described […] doesn’t even begin to look at the structural discrimination that’s in society. You know if somebody goes through that claims process and is deemed fit to work then they are in a bunfight for jobs with someone who might have a postgraduate education, fantastic health, solid financial resources and a supportive family and no factors for which they are likely to be discriminated against. So, one person is actually much more likely to get off job seeker’s allowance than the other, so to place the same expectations and requirements on those two people just doesn’t represent life and isn’t fair.

LB: Yes. It is fundamentally unfair […] and it [comes back to] the reduction, to this simplification that we've talked about. The image that comes to me all the time when I think about *Bedding Out* is Osborne's image of the person behind the closed curtains staying in bed whilst the 'hardworking families' of the UK get up and go out to work. I think of all the things that *Bedding Out* challenges and questions it is precisely the power of that image to encapsulate this rhetoric around strivers and scroungers because it works by simplifying things in relation to particular ideas of what productivity is or what work is or what living is.

LC: I think that there's also a lot of symbolic stuff like the curtains that is used against us and I think with the *Bedding Out* piece […] what I'm trying to do is to create a counter symbol so that there's a strong image that stays in the mind beyond the actual specifics of the performance or the actual conversations that are held; that [hopefully] that image can be held in people's minds next time they confront the kind of closed curtains thing …

Public/Private Selves

LB: So in *Bedding Out*, there is an endeavour to explore and to account for this [private self] that's often excluded or placed in parenthesis in some forms of activism, you bring that to the fore but it's still a performance. So when you were thinking about *Bedding Out* how did you decide what you were going to perform? Was it simply enough to reference the fact that there is this private space? Or did you make conscious choices about how you would inhabit that space or what being in that space was about? I am thinking in terms of what is revealed and what continues - I guess - not to be revealed because it was also an extraordinarily tough task I think. I get the impression that the 48 hours that you describe were really, really hard work.

LC: It's known as durational performance work and I think it's just as valid to call it endurance – and there's really an element of that and yes, it was very hard and a lot of people said to me that they were amazed by how vulnerable I was willing to make myself. I think I only realised afterwards that it was a lot more exposing than I perhaps realised. On the other hand, it was a performance and therefore I was editing, so there were aspects of that private self that I didn't show and that I am not prepared to show in front of other people. Equally what I wanted to do was to present something that wasn't too specific, so for example had you seen me taking specific medication or talking about specific impairment stuff or making visible body stuff then I would have started to represent a much narrower constituency and I didn't want that private self to be labelled in that way. What I wanted to do was to provide an image, evidence of a life lived outside the public gaze. The majority of people are astounded at the idea that there are people who spend large parts of their lives in bed. Just that, just that simple thing, is so far beyond most people's knowledge, that there are lives like that. I wanted to present that as a symbolic thing and what happened, sort of immediately really, was that a lot of other disabled people whose experience was different from that still saw it as theirs. They recognised that process of editing themselves – so it wasn't that they spent their time in bed, but there were aspects of their impairment that they too felt the need to conceal. And with hindsight, I realise that a major vulnerability was not in the performance itself but in the 'holding' of other people's hurt.

LB: And it did enable people to talk about those things and to bring those things to light didn't it? I think in some of the Twitter responses you get a sense of people being able to suddenly say things publicly that they hadn't been able to say before.

LC: I think that with all of these things, if it is just some woman lying in bed in a public space, that doesn't go very far, but what it does is to provide a platform for other people to get involved in the conversations it triggers. In theory you could sit down and have any of those conversations that were had on the back of *Bedding Out*. However, there was something about the context in which they were held and the sense of integrity in the piece - that I was prepared to commit to doing this and to revealing this side of myself - that I think enabled those conversations to go deeper. When the conversations were held around the bed, there were some incredibly profound things said there and deeply personal things – very politically thoughtful things were said - and I'm not convinced they would be able to go to the depths they did if we'd been sitting round a table or in a training session.

[…]

What I would find in some conversations is that there would be other people [around the bed] who got hold of the conversation and could respond in ways that were incredibly helpful – the sense of support amongst every single person [in some conversations] was absolutely extraordinary and compelling. There was something about that whole set up of the person in the bed raising these issues that are not generally spoken about but evidencing them, and people gathered around the bed, and that taking down of barriers that [meant] that as a group we could move things forward.

Art, creation and participation

LB: I'm interested in how this relates to the ways we think about art and the production of art and art objects. Unlike say a film which might have a particular kind of narrative trajectory, a duration, an arc of some sort, or an exhibition that people move through in particular ways, […] this is a very different way of thinking about art itself and of artistic practice. This is about being in a bed in a public space for a certain length of time. So in a sense you transform the idea of what art might be in that space, in doing this. Can you say something about the process by which you decided that this is what you were going to do, that *Bedding Out* was going to take this shape and form and how far your primary interest was in creating a piece of art or in the kind of dialogue, debate and discussion that it would generate?

LC: […] For me, one of the key differences between the performance stuff that I do and the film stuff that I have done, and may return to, is risk and a kind of leap of faith. With the films [everything] is plotted. You know it can go awry but fundamentally you know what kind of story you are trying to tell, what kind of message you want to get over, what kind of conversation you are trying to trigger and to a very large degree you're in control of how that thing turns out. How the audience reacts is still not entirely in your control but you're giving a very strong lead in how it should be interpreted and potentially acted upon. With the performance, most of that goes. What you have rather than plot is intent. So if there are elements that can be controlled, in this case the setting of the bed, the location of it, how it was set up on the stage, the kind of cues that are given– you know, is it a domestic space that I'm setting up or is it a clear performance space, what's the lighting doing? - all those give some lead as to how people might respond. However, it is also a very unscripted piece of work and it involves live interaction with people that can make it into a very different piece. The risk for me in that is that it won't achieve what I'm hoping it will do, that even where the work is politically positioned very clearly, it will lead to what for me would be a misinterpretation that would undermine the values that are at its core. So it carries a risk that I don't think the films do nearly so much, but I also think when it works that risk means the impact can be far, far deeper, and I've seen that with Plinth[9] and I've seen that with *Bedding Out*. Where it works it does something that I wouldn't have dared hope for when I first came up with the idea.

[…]

LB: And do you think it [*Bedding Out*] fostered a kind of communal awareness? In other words, was there a sense that people were participating with you together to create something collectively? Because what strikes me is that it is an attempt to break down that distinction between performer and audience in that its whole conception is inclusive, about fostering a dialogue? So you cease to have that idea of the authority being in one place [with the artist].

LC: Yes but there is the potential for a conflict of interest there. Particularly in Salisbury where it was live streamed – anyone coming to the bedside knew it would be live streamed, that were would be visuals, and the sound would be relayed and it would be sign language interpreted and so on and they would be seen. But as you see on reality TV the implications of that don't automatically translate. People would come to the bedside and they would tell their own experiences of going through ESA assessments and pretty much in every conversation somebody would break down and cry. For me there was a kind of role in making that safe for them and in responding in a way that supported them whilst, particularly in the last conversation at Salisbury, I also had quite a clear agenda that I wanted to get across in that conversation for the wider audience. The conflict [of interest then] was that I moved through five bedside conversations and there had been a gathering momentum of ideas and it became really important that that fifth conversation looked outwards and forwards, that it didn't just reiterate how awful it is but gave us a launch pad to start improving things. I knew I needed to do this but that was also the conversation where a couple came along and told the most difficult story, a really hard story. […] I was very aware of trying to manage these two agendas that could have conflicted. It was a very fine balance and I was concerned for them. Afterwards we got in touch and they said it was really hard but they were glad that they had done it so that was a real relief to know. That that was one of the dangers in those conversations, particularly with the live stream.

LB: So again, it is about that real balancing act between conceptions of tragedy, of public and private selves and performed and non-performed selves. It strikes me as a really difficult set of things to hold together and to portray and share with integrity.

LC: Yes, and it comes back to the risk thing. The reality is that with those kinds of conversations it could have gone very badly wrong, but it didn't. And it's a leap of faith; trying to trust that the process will be alright, but not having a clue whether it will be. What made it was the personal stories that people brought. We could have had a debate around the bed about grand theory about this stuff and everyone would have gone away with information and potentially deep thinking but they wouldn't have felt that connection to the issues that came through people bringing pieces of themselves to it.

LB: […] In other words, it was about finding a way for people to bear witness and to do so publicly because that is central to the politics of what's happening right now. You need to have these stories and the stories need to be told. […] *Bedding Out* provided people with a space to do that but in a space in which those stories are understood in relationship to bigger structures – things that aren't personal.

LC: The contextualising for me was absolutely at the core of it. There's a reason that newspapers turn to human issue stories because they connect with us, but it is really easy to do a human interest story that is superficial about one person's tragedy; it is much harder to put it into that political context, but for what I am trying to do it's critical.

The Use of Twitter

LB: This leads me to the use of Twitter and its relationship to the performances because there's no bed on Twitter, no place around which people are sitting. Can you say more about your decision to use Twitter?

LC: Because a significant proportion of people on Twitter were in their own beds. In the first performance, in Ipswich, I was using Twitter only to report on the performance and not yet as an integral component of the work. But I was emailed by someone who said 'I love what you're doing, I'd love to come and see it but I'm in my own bed so that's not an option, but I'm still really happy that you're doing this and I feel represented'. So between conversations in Ipswich, I lay in bed, angst-ing on how I solve this. I'd done a tiny bit of Twitter and had had an account for a while, but wasn't using it on a grand scale, but I suddenly thought that I would look to Twitter and see if there was a possibility of developing something there, because I couldn't think of how else to get people participating virtually, of how to bring them into the performance space without their being physically present. I thought Twitter plus live stream could be a way forward and so I looked for recommendations of people who were really good on Twitter and found Dawn Willis who became my tweetmeister. It absolutely needed somebody in a dedicated role, but working very closely with me on it. I couldn't have done both. But her experience in social media really clinched that as a way forward.

LB: Was that an experience in connecting with people or with knowing how to tweet in the most effective ways?

LC: Both, and probably lots of other things too. Dawn already had a sizable following on her own account so she had a reputation, particularly in mental health circles, which meant that there was quite a nice [coming together] of mental health and physical impairment communities. We came from those different perspectives with a common political endeavour and so, where the two communities have traditionally been split, it was brilliant to bring them together. Our two communities brought quite a range of people into the same conversation. So she had a reputation and was well liked, so her putting information out on Twitter brought in people who didn't know about my work, but it also brought in people who did know my work already.

LB: Do you think that there are any disadvantages to Twitter in relation to the kinds of conversations that you might want to conduct?

LC: There is one thing I've observed in relation to the conversations that took place in *Bedding Out* and the work that takes place through In Actual Fact.[10] I think Twitter in *Bedding Out* was Twitter at its best, because what it did was facilitate conversation. I think Twitter at its weakest is something I've seen sometimes in In Actual Fact, where there would be a mass tweet against a programme such as *Benefits Street* and what you have is two opposing views shouting into the dark and no one listens to anyone and there's no conversation going on. So I think using Twitter to foster conversation was fantastic and it worked but I also think Twitter can be appalling. But even with those reservations, what I have realised with In Actual Fact is that it's not just those two opposing shouts, it's what happens to the whole stream of tweets afterwards and the way they get retweeted and retweeted, and commented upon, and therefore the net is cast wider. With each person who picks it up, their followers expand from the followers I have, so there is an increasing chance of reaching people who don't know about these issues and will be introduced to them.

LB: Perhaps, the aim of mass tweeting in relation to a TV programme isn't about having a conversation. Perhaps the aim is to say no, there are groups of people out here who are acting together to challenge what you are doing?

LC: Yes, it's about presence more than content. And it's also about solidarity with other who think as you do, a bolstering of your own resilience and ability to keep your activism going. But I'd thought its reach would stop at that point. But I was talking to someone the other day because I was feeling very despondent about In Actual Fact and he said people really like this, they are coming to it and using it and he's still seeing tweets he sent two months ago being retweeted. So their reach is far bigger than we are ever going to know. So I do think it has value beyond that immediate moment when you tweet in response to a programme. But the *Bedding Out* Twitter conversations were so powerful in all sorts of ways. It required us to start things off, to introduce topics, to get people used to the idea of this forthcoming performance, but there was a point where people started to bring in their own ideas and to make suggestions about things, for instance, that people could submit their own *Bedding Out* photos and videos in solidarity. So these semi-independent projects happened, but there were also conversations instigated by other people in response, and there were conversations that went off at an angle and presumably carried on that we never heard about, so it became active in all kinds of directions.

The other thing is that we did is have two types of round the bed conversations. There was one where Dawn had earmarked all kinds of interesting Twitter comments and questions for me and she translated my responses back into Twitter. So you'd get the tweets coming in and the tweets going out, along with the live stream. The other thing we did was have Twitter conversations with particular groups. On the eve of the Salisbury performance we had a conversation with OT chat (a professional development group of Occupational Therapists). They were asking questions in relation to the performance and their own practice and it was a really interesting conversation that subsequently became a transcript that, along with all the other conversations, is now available as a reference tool.

LB: What kind of new things have emerged then on the basis of the conversations that happened on Twitter?

LC: It's hard to know, as in I think that many of the most significant things are not particularly tangible. A lot of people talked about the confidence they'd got from it, the friendships they'd built - and we are talking about people who in many instances are incredibly isolated, so to make social contacts through this is huge. There are people who have been introduced to a political perspective on their own lives or on policy changes, that's definitely come out of it. In Actual Fact has come out of it directly. There was a moment in the conversations when we had been talking and tweeting about media representation of disabled people within the whole benefits austerity thing and I'd mentioned the Daily Mail reporting that said 75% of people were faking it, when in fact it was 0.7%. As the conversation went on it became incredibly clear that one of things we needed to do was to start getting the facts out there, so on the second night we started (off the cuff) an additional hashtag #truefacts and started getting those facts out. Subsequently, I made that into a whole new project and called it #InActualFact. That has taken off as a completely independent entity and is perhaps the biggest tangible thing that has come out of it. It now has interns working on it and the intention is to make it a campaign of real influence. So a surprising number of things have come from it really, in ways I could never have predicted.

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[1] It is possible to access audio, images and the Twitter feed of *Bedding Out* here: http://www.roaring-girl.com/work/bedding-out/.

[2] Iain Duncan Smith 'Welfare for the 21st Century' speech (2010) See: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/welfare-for-the-21st-century[accessed 02/10/2015]

[3] This is a widely reported incident. See, for example, http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/sick-benefits-claimant-heart-attack-3098219 [accessed 02/10/2015]

[4] See http://dpac.uk.net/ [accessed 02/10/2105] and http://wowpetition.com/write-to-your-mp-now/ [accessed 02/10/2015]

[5] On mortality statistics see https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/459106/mortality-statistics-esa-ib-sda.pdf [accessed 02/10/2015]. On the fabrication of the experiences of benefit claimants on a DWP leaflet see http://www.theguardian.com/society/2015/aug/18/dwp-admits-making-up-positive-quotes-from-benefits-claimants-for-leaflet [accessed 02/10/2015]. On UN investigation see http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/un-to-investigate-uk-over-human-rights-abuses-against-disabled-people-caused-by-welfare-reform-10478536.html [accessed 02/10/2105].

[6] George Osborne, speech to the annual Conservative Party Conference, Birmingham, 8.10.12, http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/politics/2012/10/george-osbornes-speech-conservative-conference-full-text [accessed 20.08.15]

[7] See https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/fraud-and-error-in-the-benefit-system [accessed 22.08.15]

[8] See http://www.cps.gov.uk/publications/prosecution/disability.html [accessed 22.08.15]

[9] *Resistance on the Plinth* was a 2008 performance by Liz Crow that took place as part of Antony Gormley's *One & Other* on the Trafalgar Square plinth.

[10] In Actual Fact @InActualFact101 was a web- and Twitter-based social media campaign created by Liz Crow that set out to counter inaccuracies in austerity claims.

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