Keynote presentation: Figures: austerity and activism in a 'post-truth' era

Liz Crow (voiced by Jess Keilly)
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Transcript

Liz [very croaky voice]: It's lovely to be here. The only disappointment is that most of my voice seems to have been left at home. Because of this, what I've done is prepare a script for Jess here to present, so she'll be speaking my words for me today.

When it comes to any questions at the end, I'll work with as much voice as I've got and, if it disappears completely, we'll improvise at that point. So I'll pass you over to Jess now, with deep thanks to her.

Jess: Hello. So I'm going to be reading Liz's script that she's prepared in the first person, because it's her words, so obviously when I'm saying 'I', that's Liz speaking.

So in this presentation, I'm talking about a performance work that I undertook in 2015.

The *Figures* project was a mass sculptural durational performance that set out to make visible the human cost of austerity and crucially to urge action against it. I'm sure you'll all be aware of Robert's new book *Crip Times*, and it's been a real honour to have *Figures* included in there and to know that its inclusion means it can keep on doing work. Today is a chance for me to describe the project in greater detail, the events of the work, the thinking that went into it, what I set out to achieve with it, but also to set it in its larger political context.

I'm going to start by talking about political circumstances that gave rise to the work, that is the UK government's ongoing program of austerity and the impact it has had on swathes of the population. From there, I'll talk briefly about the form of activism I have developed to become, now, my main practice, then I'll move on to talk some detail about the setting up and realisation of the performance itself. Finally, I'm going to reflect on what all of that might mean, particularly in relation to activism in a post-truth context. What are the questions it raises for how we address injustice and push for change?

I performed *Figures* in early 2015 over the four months running up to a general election in the UK. Five years earlier in 2010, a right wing Conservative led coalition government had taken power. in the wake of a global economic crash, they presented austerity as a necessary solution to a high level of national debt.

Austerity, as they presented it, would be a collective belt tightening. The nation economising together for the greater national good. In practice, the effects of austerity were uneven. They were felt immediately and most strongly by those people who security was already the most precarious. In contrast, the richest tend to do well out of austerity.

Behind its public presentation of acute necessity, austerity has been a way for a right wing government to pursue a core ideological goal. Austerity has been well established as a policy that does more harm than good. Yet the economic crisis became an ideal vehicle to usher through a cutting back on public services and on the role of the state under the guise of responsible

stewardship. The government line on austerity has been upheld by mass media, and that has paid a pivotal role in disseminating and reinforcing it. The problem, we were told, was not the wealthiest one percent and not the global banking structure; it was individuals, the skiver and shirkers, the feckless and fraudsters who claim benefits as a lifestyle choice and have driven the nation into debt.

It's a rationale that was bought, and continues to be bought, by much of the general population. Even the more liberal press was seduced by the message, and it took a couple of years for papers such as *The Guardian* even to begin reporting on the heavy toll that austerity was exacting and questioning the motives behind it.

First to be affected, and hardest hit, have been disabled people. The first changes were to Social Security - a radical overhaul of a system that, for sure, was broken, but this was an overhaul driven by cuts rather than wellbeing. The notorious Work Capability Assessment was introduced to decide a person's eligibility for support, and this has seen hundreds of thousands of disabled people losing their income, then having to go before a judge for it to be reinstated - or not - before being called back for assessment a couple of months later. it has seen many people placed in the Work Related Activity Group, where preparing for work is made a condition of receiving an income, even if the person has no possibility of returning to work or is made much iller by having to leave their home and undertake these work related activities.

Not to follow Job Centre requirements to the letter leads to sanctions in some instances, with money being removed entirely for months at a time. Of course, this doesn't begin to convey the human costs: the upheaval and distress and sometimes dire hardship experienced by people at the sharpest end, the circumstances that leave people in the sixth richest nation depending on foodbanks (assuming they can get to a foodbank), losing their home, or resorting to suicide.

Beyond the changes to Social Security, austerity has been rolled out across government departments and local authorities across the UK, with departments losing up to 40% of their budgets for national and local services. So the impact has reverberated through the whole spectrum of social infrastructure: home care, hospital treatment, funding for student tuition, school building programs, emergency services, libraries, public sector wages, road maintenance, and so on.

While the impact of Social Security cuts was immediate, but largely private and behind closed doors, cuts to generic public services generally had a slower but more public impact. This second phase of cuts extended the reach of austerity to a much broader public. At its logical conclusion, once austerity hits road maintenance or the weekly collection of trash, there is no one unaffected at some level. By two years in, the effects were being felt more distinctly by middle class people, through public wage freezes, extended hospital waiting lists, reduced policing or school buildings not being maintained, and this coincided with the start of deeper questioning section from more liberal sections of the press.

Activists of course moved to protest from the start, with disabled people at the core and forefront, with campaigns such as Disabled People Against the Cuts, Spartacus and the WOW (War on Welfare) petition. With our very active disabled people's movement in a period of dormancy this was a kind of reawakening of the next generation of activists, people of all ages, new to politics or to disabled people's politics.

The WOW petition, in particular, was motivated by the need to identify the cumulative impact of austerity policies. The more likely someone is to feel the impact of austerity, that is people whose security is already the most precarious, the more likely they are to feel its impact from multiple sources. So someone might lose not only their Employment and Support Allowance and their

Disability Living Allowance, but their kids' playgroup and the bus service to the cheapest grocery shops, while their ability to return to work is put back by delays to hospital treatment or wheelchair services.

The government claimed that cumulative impact was too complex an equation to pin down, though several voluntary agencies did go on to do it for them, researching the combined impact of tax, Social Security and public spending policies. They showed that some households were losing up to 13% of their income, and the people with the most significant impairment lost the most income of all.

But beyond material consequences and on a national scale, the cumulative impact of austerity has been marked by a rise in inequality, deterioration in the population's mental health, increases in hate crime and nationalism, and deaths, particularly of disabled benefits claimants. A recent headline links austerity to an extra 120,000 deaths in England. In the run-up to the 2015 general election, with further austerity threatened by all the main political parties, it was clear that the harm could only increase and, along with other activists, it became clear that we needed to make it into a very public election issue.

It was out of that that *Figures* was born.

I wanted to expose the human impact that had remained so well hidden from the public. In fact, I wanted to produce my own cumulative impact assessment. This would extend beyond the representation solely of disabled people, to expose the sweep of austerity across the UK. Disabled people would inevitably be disproportionately highly represented because of the excessive injury undergone by that community.

Initially I set out present a fairly simple concept: to make visible the human cost of austerity; to use that as a point of entry for a range of audiences to explore the structures and the injustice is behind it. The work began with a simple principle, that any policy causing such hardship was wrong and needed to be rejected. With an election looming, I wanted people to understand what they were voting for, but also to become politically conscious for the longer term.

Figures emerged from over 30 years spent in activism, a shift into creative work and an intertwining with my own experience as a disabled person at the sharpish end of austerity. It was the fourth in a series of performances and projects I have undertaken to protest austerity, and if you'd like to see more, then do have a look at *Bedding Out*, *In Actual Fact*, and the *Atos Protest Armband* on my website.

Over three decades of activism, my practice has shifted. I have largely moved away from the more traditional direct and confrontational methods, those styles of activism that powerfully occupy public space, speaking loudly and unambiguously, often angrily, about the change that is needed. Don't get me wrong: I remain a fan of those more orthodox methods, and I haven't stopped joining marches and blockades and so on. In fast changing political times, we need fast moving activism. If your president brings in a ban on citizens from Muslim majority countries, there is an immediate need to assemble at airports and seats of power to make known your alliances and outrage. (And if the timing of my flight home allows it, I plan to join the Rally Against Gun Violence this Saturday.)

But we also need forms of activism that work beyond immediate response and for the long term. It is with this in mind that I practice through less direct and confrontational methods, and often through my creative work, and particularly through performance. I use a lot of symbolism, even mystery, in my performance work. As you're seeing in a moment when I describe *Figures* in more

detail, often what I do is set up a curious encounter in public spaces, something that doesn't announce quite why it's there or what it's about, but uses that ambiguity to draw in passersby in a way that raises questions and, in turn, leads to dialogue.

What I am seeking in people who encounter the work is a visceral response, an emotional and embodied connection to its themes. I want to make difficult facts more human and to lodge them inside people. I aim to create images and stories that will linger, and create questions that are not fully answered, so that people keep on returning to the themes of the work long after they have left the space in which they found it.

My work is generally durational, and often quietly contemplative, unfolding over extended time so that people can keep coming back, becoming part of its development and developing their own ideas and practices more deeply. I set out to create a space for people to explore their own position and responsibility in relation to the themes of the work - and in the case of *Figures*: what does austerity have to do with them, and they to do with it?

Conversations begin from an individual's own position. They might be completely new to any understanding of the issue, or deeply knowledgeable about it. They might be removed from its impact, or at the sharpest end. The conversations that ensue range from deeply personal to profoundly political, across politics and ideology, justice, fairness, kindness, what kind of world we want to live in, and what solutions there might be. Crucially, with dialogue at its core, this is an activism that deals in complexities and unresolved questions. It acknowledges that though ideals and goals may have absolute clarity, achieving change at the deepest and most sustained level is always complicated.

I'm going to turn now to the *Figures* project and show how I applied to those principles of activism in this specific work.

Figures began in my home city of Bristol, in the south-west of England. The first phase of the performance took place on the banks of the River Avon, where a team dug out quarter of a ton of mud, which I then shifted through by hand. It was then treated in a pug mill with the extruded mud prepared for the next performance phase.

The mud was transported from Bristol to London, and I took up residence on the River Thames foreshore for 11 consecutive days and nights, dressed deliberately to semi-camouflage myself in the surroundings. Over those days and nights, at every low tide, I knelt on the foreshore in three-hour sessions and sculpted - ultimately producing 650 small human figures, palm sized, each one representing an individual at the shop end of austerity. The figures were all shaped in the same form, but every one differed in its detail, so that they represented both collective humanity and the individual. That 650 echoed the number of electoral constituencies in the UK, throughout which the effects of austerity could be felt, as well as the numbers of Members of Parliament, all with the power to influence the future of austerity and the opportunities of people they had been elected to represent.

Every figure was paired with a short narrative of a person at the sharp end of austerity, written to convey both the human cost and the humanity of those harms. Collated and edited from press, parliamentary reports, research and policy and campaign materials in the field of social justice, each time a new figure was made, a story was released via social media.

Narratives were drawn from all electoral constituencies throughout the UK, demonstrating the far reaching impact of austerity. And they represented a wide spectrum of themes across benefits

reform, local authority spending, homelessness, malnutrition, library closures, underemployment job insecurity, NHS budget restrictions and so on. They ranged from the extremes of increased impairment and death to people who haven't yet experienced concrete or material changes, but who have gone through the distress of assessments, or who have lost their sense of security, or who are worried about the future.

Single narratives depict the impact of austerity upon individuals in a range of circumstances. The combined weight demonstrates its collective and cumulative impact.

These are just three examples from the 650, and just to warn you they are a difficult listen:

> Angela works in a supermarket but can't afford to buy any of the food she handles at the checkout. Sometimes she's so hungry she can hardly bear to look at the food at all. It's an irony not lost on her, but she ends up going for work at the supermarket to a foodbank. She says, even with a 10% staff discount, it's completely out of reach. It's a trap that I just can't see my way out of. I've tried everything I can to keep going. You only get three vouchers from the foodbank and I've already used two. I don't know what I'm going to do.
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> 36-year-old Martin was assessed as fit for work. He had had a diagnosis of schizophrenia, but with the support of mental health services was managing to stay off drugs and to live independently with a strong group of friends. His mother says the prospect of having to take a job before he felt ready had piled on the pressure. Two months after his assessment, he left a note saying to those I love I'm sorry goodbye. [Jess pauses.]
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> When 35-year-old mother Lucy missed an interview at the job Centre, her disability benefits were stopped, leaving her [Jess: pauses tearfully], her partner and her 18-month old toddler without anything to live on. She went to her local supermarket and stole a chicken and some soap powder. Two weeks later, she was up before the magistrate. Her police interview noted that she said sorry to the shop, but she had no money and was in a desperate situation. She was ordered to pay compensation, a fine, costs and a surcharge, a total of over £200, despite the precipitating factor being that she had no money. Her solicitor says her chief worry was that the social services might find out and take away her baby.

Figures took place in all weathers, and I'd almost forgotten until I shifted through these images again, just how variable the weather was. We had glorious sunshine, but also gale force winds and sleet and rain, with temperatures cold enough for ten layers of thermals. At times I had to work under plastic sheeting - to protect the figures, not me - to make sure they were safe and the mud wouldn't be washed away.

Conditions on the foreshore, and our own embodied interactions with it, became part of the durational and endurance aspects of the work. The foreshore was down a steep flight of steps, and my making spot was across an expanse of uneven shingle so, as a wheelchair user, the team hefted me in a sling to and from every session. At the planning stage, I had imagined this being about the logistics of the work, dealing with the practical issue of getting myself to and from the performance space, but it was very quickly clear that it was as much a part of the performance as anything else was. It became a mirroring, a rehearsal even, of the set of values that the project was advocating for: trust, mutual cooperation, shared dependence and interdependency, connectedness, and a commentary on the physical and emotional labour of both activism and austerity. There was a kind of integrity that came out of how hard the performance was that drew audiences to it and into the conversations.

In a similar way, and just as unexpected, the shifts in people who worked on *Figures* also became part of the piece. Many were young and experiencing the effects of austerity for themselves, in several instances, finding that the post-university promise of a good job wasn't materialising after all. Others had grown up with significant hardships and realised, in the austerity narratives, that there were things they recognised in their own experience, even where they had not had the language or the politics to give voice to it. Most were reticent about talking to the public at the start, feeling they did not know enough, but what they brought was a gut feeling, a raw justice sense of how can you want to sustain a system that is hurting people? And that permeated the conversations they had, at the same time as they built their own political knowledge.

The siting of figures on the foreshore of the Thames was a deliberate salute to the old 18th century occupation of mudlarking, where people from the poorest levels of society, and especially people too young or too old or ill for paid employment, would scour the shingle every day, searching for things washed up from merchant vessels and the sea that they could sell in order to eke a living.

Being on the south side - the people's side - of the river also placed me in geographic opposition to the primary institutions of austerity: parliament, the old Fleet Street of journalism, the legal district, and the economic centre of Canary wharf. The work took place just below the iconic Oxo Tower , an everyday space of both gentrification and rough sleeping, of rooted community and transient populations, so it reached a diverse audience: local residents and workers who encountered the work daily, families on Easter school break, tourists and international travellers who shared experiences of austerity from home, people insulated from austerity, and those who had slept the previous night on the foreshore for lack of shelter.

Curiosity was key to drawing audiences in: a sideways approach that prompted participation from people who would not intentionally approach a project on austerity. Volunteer stewards and members of the project team supported the conversations that developed out of those encounters and, as my presence on the foreshore became more established, increasing numbers of people came down from the raised riverwalk to watch at close hand and talk to me.

The reach of the performance and conversations was amplified by social media and, over the extended period of the performance, people would make return visits. Some heard about the project and travelled especially. The people I met ranged from the city gent - smart coat and shiny shoes - on his way back from work, who knew nothing of the impact of austerity, but who stayed crouched against the detritus of the foreshore, and talked and listened for a long time, and the man returning angry and distressed from a job centre appointment, who sat and talked, and seemingly was put back together again for a moment.

And so, through its encounters with audiences, the work enlarged beyond exposing the human costs of austerity to a quiet sustaining to some of those at its sharpest end. Some people brought small offerings, and one time we came down to a making session and found a message in the sand: 'We love you We Are Figures'.

The project's position on austerity was clearly in opposition. Conversations, though, were deliberately open ended, beginning from the experience and knowledge of the participating public in order to encourage involvement and keep it relevant. An exchange might begin with questions about sculpting or the tides, but then extend the real people represented by the figures, to shared accounts of the impact of austerity on friends, neighbours, strangers and themselves, and onto the deeper political questions raised by the work: the architecture of austerity, the values we want to underpin our society and to live by, the role we might each have in bringing that about.

In the contextualising the stories of individuals, *Figures* became a representation of human loss and societal failings, a naming of the collective work we need to do. At the end of every making session, as the incoming tide encroached and the newly shaped figures were moved to a nearby exhibition space, so that the returning members of the public could watch them amass as the days progressed.

For a handful of sessions, the performance left the foreshore and set up on the street outside key austerity landmarks: the Borough of Deptford where the impact of austerity has been particularly harsh, outside parliament, and in front of government departments. In this image, I am outside the Department of Work and Pensions, the department responsible for the worst of austerity through the changes it has brought to Social Security. Our small team were very quickly outnumbered by security guards muttering into their walkie-talkies, and I'm pretty sure that the red splashes of paint on the building's marble are left over from a previous demonstration.

They tried to move us on, but we stayed until I'd completed the figures I had planned for that venue. We had a few conversations with passersby, a couple of whom recognised me as 'the austerity woman', but dialogue was muted and felt more like a conventional, confrontational form of activism. It was interesting the extent to which staff distanced themselves. Some darted past like frightened rabbits, another, with heavy sarcasm, dubbed us 'today's exhibition', but it felt like a department under a siege. As we were leaving, one of the guards promised he would look at the narratives.

Once the completed figures were dried, they were toured en masse in the week before the election, in a mobile exhibition that stopped at cities from London to Bristol in order to continue the conversations that began on the foreshore and streets. Our first scheduled visit took us to a London borough ranked high on the economic deprivation index and low for voter turnout, but our site booking was cancelled at short notice by council officials who cited election purdah. By law they must not undertake activities that could influence the outcome of the election - although it would be hard to think of a more crucial time to discuss the human impact of any policy. While another local authority barred us on grounds that our tour vehicle was not attractive enough for their town centre.

So we turned the tour guerilla, joining the international labour movement rally in Trafalgar Square in celebration of Mayday, and parking up in Whitney outside then Prime Minister David Cameron's constituency office. In Whitney, the team met Bridget, whose friend Mark is included in the 650 narratives. Mark starved to death after his benefits were stopped.

When Robert asked me whether he could include Bridget's tweet in his book, I contacted her for permission and she wrote back, 'I was very moved by your exhibition, and I can't believe even now my reaction. It really took my breath away. I'm happy for you to use the image, and anything that keep Mark's memory alive would be wonderful.'

Overall, this phase of the work again felt closer to a more conventional, confrontational form of activism, more so than at any other point during the project. In touring, we had to declare the purpose of the work much more overtly, which meant we spoke most readily to people who already understood the issues - not that this invalidated the conversations, because there is a role in activism for bolstering each other, so we can keep entering the fray, but what we lost was the mystery of the foreshore and the way that allowed a sideways approach for people who would otherwise not choose to grapple with the issues of the work.

We reached Bristol on the eve of the election and brought the figures back to water's edge. Here, they were wrapped, built into a bonfire and fired, and as they fired, the 650 narratives of austerity were read aloud by the project team, broadcast by livestream in a six-hour performance.

As the tide came in, it doused the flames, sending up plumes of steam like smoke signals. Just as the sea threatened to wash them away, the figures were rescued. Fired, burned and broken, they were gathered and ground down to dust.

The final phase of the performance took place three weeks after the election on the State Opening of Parliament (which is similar to the State of the Union Address). At this point, for five years, activists and other communities had worked relentlessly to alert both the voting population and the government to the impact of austerity. Yet the election brought another downturn in the political landscape. We were facing not just a Coalition government, but a Conservative majority government. This time they had much greater power to drive through the extended and amplified austerity programme that, during the election, they had pledged to bring in.

It was clear that none of our protests were being heard at home and, recognising this, a group of disabled activists made an entreaty to the United Nations asking them to investigate the austerity programme's cumulative impact. Those investigations would subsequently charge the UK government with 'grave and systematic violations' of the rights of disabled people, stating that austerity had led to a 'human catastrophe' in the UK. To echo the activist appeal to the United Nations, I sailed out into the tidal Bristol channel and on towards the ocean, taking the remains of the figures with me and scattering them into open waters in a symbolic distress call to the global community.

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In this last section of this presentation, I'm going to reflect on what *Figures* might mean in a truth and 'post-truth' context. What are the questions it raises for how we can address injustice and push for change? What are the versions of truth I worked with in the project? And how can we work with different notions of truth for best effect?

I'm going to begin with a bit more background to the performance. The version of *Figures* I have just introduced you to is, more truthfully, *Figures* mark 2, because there was a first incarnation, well into development, which was suddenly scuppered. The idea for *Figures* came out of conversations with fellow activist Rick Burgess of WOW petition. He had approached an eminent epidemiologist with expertise on the long term and generational health and wellbeing impacts of austerity, as well as quantitative research on austerity suicides. The three of us would work together: the epidemiologist would supply a projected figure for deaths associated with austerity; Rick and I would publicise it in the run-up to the election, using it for political leverage. My task would be to take an impossibly abstract number and communicate it to a public in a way that would make it meaningful and possible to connect to: one sculpted figure for every death; a dry statistic made visceral.

The figure he proposed, a projection for the next 25 years, was vast, dizzying, appalling - and then, more than a year into planning, with the election looming, he withdrew it. It's hard to say how enraged I was at the time. Here was a possibility that this figure could save lives, yet for the want of certainty the epidemiologist played safe. I wanted him to take the risk precisely in order to make his projection wrong - to ensure that it would not come true. To wait ten, 20 or more years in order to look back and say, yes, this is a definitive number would be to confirm a harrowing tragedy and travesty of justice, and perhaps in a small way to be complicit.

With distance, I know it's more complicated than that. There is something about a statistic, thoroughly researched, methodologically sound, that has an air of God's own truth about it – except of course, measured by people in a social world, it is never entirely objective. If we had used his figure, however authoritative, there would have been vested interests that would have ensured public focus on the work would centre not on the scandal of deaths, but the truth of the number. The number risked being a distraction and an avoidance of what mattered. The moral significance would have been obscured, and the impact of austerity on people rendered invisible all over again.

I had to rethink the project - as you've seen shifting it from number of deaths to the more diffuse 'human cost'. In the long term, I think it made for better work. Some people have said the smaller scale – those 650 figures – made it more approachable, easier to connect with. That this new number linked specifically to the political infrastructure and the election in process gave the work a more intentional focus.

In this new version, I moved onto working with other truths. First, the truth that mattered most in this context, a context of connecting and mobilising people, was its meaning, its moral significance. I set out to represent it through story and symbol, emotion, values, and dialogue. By indirectly presenting the themes of the work, I hoped to create a visceral connectedness in audiences to the impact of austerity on themselves and those around them, with the aim of moving them towards action. In the new incarnation of the work, I did not set out to present objective, verifiable facts, because the priority was to embed a deeper truth inside people who encountered it.

Second, some level of verifiable truth still mattered, because I wanted to ground the meaning of the work in solid experience - especially in the face of so much propaganda about skivers and shirkers. So the narratives took on this role, offering a counter narrative to the voice of government and press, and rooting the public emotional response in real events. Individually, they are the story of personal suffering; taken en masse, they expose the bigger truth of the structures that do people harm.

Of course, truth is a slippery thing: the narratives are subjective; inevitably they are a partial account of people's lives, but they are also data from real lives. The difficult experiences described would be hard to link solely to austerity, but they all have a considerable and active austerity component. The truth is, the people most likely to experience the greatest impact are those who are already in poverty, or who haven't had good access to education, or whose circumstances leave them with less room to manoeuvre, and that's why they're so vulnerable to its impact. The narratives grapple with the complexities of real life, and it is that complexity that makes them truthful.

When I took the narratives away from a sole focus on death, it didn't mute the shock value but shifted it. The stories remain shocking: en masse it's hard not to be overwhelmed, but cumulatively they also extend across a range of social identity, age, gender, ethnicity and so on, personal circumstances and scale of impact, making it likely that anyone who encounters them will find someone or something familiar in the descriptions. My intention is that the narratives, and the little clay figures, cease to be about 'them', those 'other' people who are suffering - who you might feel energised about, but who are different from you - and you start to see something of yourself in the small clay figures and the people they represent, and in that way they become truthful.

Third, the conversations that emerged out of the performance became part of uncovering a larger story of austerity: the city gent in his shiny shoes and the bloke in fury and despair on his way back from the job centre are both a part of the truth of austerity. Ignorance and different kinds of knowledge, obliviousness and despair, division and connectedness, they are parts of the whole; they

are parts of what allows division to build and perpetuate, and the solutions lie in the connections made.

Fourth, I brought the truth, subjective though it is, of my own experience of austerity. It runs throughout the work, visible to different degrees at different times. I describe myself as being at the sharp-ish end of austerity, fortunate so far to have avoided the worst, but subject for all of the past eight years to what's known as 'fear of the brown envelope' – that inevitable announcement of imminent disruption. I've had my income removed, sat in front of a judge to get it reinstated, and weathered the accompanying emotional vulnerability and the loss of a fragile security. All of that informed my selection of the narratives, a kind of truth test if you like, because my personal experience, and that of so many people around me, led to an intuitive grasp of the desperate and tangled ways in which austerity can impact.

I think that knowledge, born of my own connection to austerity, brought a kind of integrity to the work, another kind of truth. When I endured on that foreshore, it represented my own experience of the human cost of austerity, and I think that sense of integrity opened up the possibility of encounters and conversations. It opened up conversations that ranged far and wide, and sometimes very deep.

And fifth, I worked with, and presented, the truth knowingly. I am an activist. The work I do both demands hard facts and sometimes it requires I present them for effect. My purpose in *Figures* was to draw people in, and make dialogue a possibility towards change, and so I presented on the foreshore as a lone figure, camouflaged on the shingle, with my mounds of mud and my small clay figures. I deliberately did not declare my purpose, in order to draw people in. Through a sideways approach, they initiated conversation and that was my opportunity to draw audiences to the subject of the work.

And I chose my language carefully. In speaking of the work, I described it as making visible the human cost of austerity. More accurate would have been making visible the human cost of the neoliberal agenda, since that was always at its core. Austerity, though, was a word of the moment, where neoliberalism had most people running for the hills, a word too confusing, too vast, two alienating, 'too political'. In going undercover at the point of performance, the work was able to do more.

Through the *Figures* performance and other works, I am seeking activism that can be productive for the longer term, one that creates change that is sustainable and through methods that themselves can be sustained. Often, I'm attempting less to influence immediate or specific practicalities and more the structures and cultures and values that underpin them. It is change with the long term in mind.

I've covered a lot in this presentation, perhaps bombarded you with information. Ironically, it's kind of the opposite of how I do activism. But I hope you'll all find something I've used to take away to think with, and I'd welcome your comments and questions.

Thank you.

Q&A session

Q: You had a story for each figure. I imagine you've encountered more than 650 stories, so how did you decide which ones to accept and which to reject?

Liz: I looked at thousands upon thousands of narratives, and what I wanted to do was compile 650 that, first of all, covered all 650 electoral constituencies because I wanted to show that austerity was happening everywhere; there wasn't a single area of the UK that could claim it was free of the impact of austerity. But then, within that, I wanted audiences to be able to relate to those figures, so it became important that an incredible range of people were represented – that austerity impacts all ethnicities, it impacts all ages, it impacts different genders, and so on. There isn't really a sector of society that doesn't get impacted in some way, so the narratives would have the most obviously extreme situations, but they'd have situations that were somewhat tolerable, but still represented a degree of human cost, so as a package it wasn't simply this absolute onslaught of desperation. Somebody who was actually relatively comfortable could still find somebody in there that they could connect to, whilst as a package, it didn't get away soft pedalling the impact.

So it was a very complex sifting process, because I had ulterior motives in mind, and when I actually looked through the different narratives, because I got them from a lot of different sources and I wanted to present them in a way that was relatively neutral read, so sometimes for example I'd get a story from a newspaper and it was quite emotively written and I wanted to take some of that emotion out of it, because what I didn't want to do was almost tell the reader how to respond to it, I wanted the response once again to be visceral from them. So there's quite a lot of editing went on in that full compilation.

Robert: Can I just add it to that? I love the ways in which the stroke of grinding the figures down and throwing them out to sea actually makes those 650 stories touch, sort of literally in a material sense, so many other stories, so if what has happened in the UK from 2010 forward is connected to what's happening in Spain and Greece and here in the US, and austerity logic is so sedimented, that throwing it out to the ocean is, in one way, as you said, a call out to the world, but also a gesture of solidarity with those stories that are really global.

Liz: Yes, that international connection suddenly became completely compelling. I don't know that it was there in my mind at the beginning of the project, although actually on the *Bedding Out* project I've been contacted by people, particularly from Australia, who were saying we're watching with interest what's happening in the UK because we feel it coming our way. But that international thing became utterly compelling as time went on through the project.

Q: So this project was done in 2015, I was wondering what sort of tangible change you've seen in the austerity policies in the UK since then and if you can link some of that back to your specific work and work of activists like yourself.

Liz: Officially, austerity is over. There was an announcement made a number of months ago that the government is no longer pursuing austerity as a policy. Of course, even if all future measures stopped in an instant, as conversations with the epidemiologist made clear, the impact unfolds not over just decades but generations. I think one thing that became really clear for me is that, in the world in general, when political decisions are made, we never go back. So I've heard people say, the work of the disabled people's movement, for example, has been set back 30 years and it has, but it's not as simple as that. We haven't gone back in time, we've gone to a different time, and there isn't a point of which you can wipe out the impact of austerity, we are now in a different context and moving on from that, trying to repair, but hankering back to pre-austerity is an impossible dream,

what we have to do is actually create a new future and learn from what has happened and try, with any progress we make, to make it sturdier, less fragile, because I think a lot of the changes we've made politically have been a lot more fragile than we realised, so austerity has been able to disrupt 30 years of progress just like that [snaps fingers], which has been a very frightening thing to realise.

In terms of what's happening now, the policies really are still unfolding, so if we just take the example of benefits changes, there are still things being implemented there, and even when new policies are not being put into place, where disabled people are trying to take things to the law courts, has shown the degree of inhumanity in which the policies have enacted, trying to expose that. What we're finding is courts may make a judgement, but the Department of Work and Pensions undermines it, so there's a lot of stuff that isn't strictly speaking policy but it's still leading to a lot of the hardships of austerity.

Q: I was wondering specifically, you brought up that the [foreshore] shingles weren't accessible and the shale prevented you from getting to the banks and so you were physically carried to that area. At the same time, it brings up the question did you have other disabled visitors down on the banks and was that intentional, is that ironic? What can you say to that?

Liz: That's a great question. I think ironic, although it wasn't intended to be. I hadn't expected people to come and visit me on the foreshore when I set it up. The foreshore is obviously down by the river, but then there's an elevated riverwalk and that's where all the team were based. That's where I thought the conversations would happen, and it was exactly that situation where a friend of mine came to greet me at the end of one of the sessions and said, this is ironic, it's the first performance of yours that I haven't been able to get to. So I just hadn't anticipated it, which I look back and think how naive is that because, every performance I ever do, I build an audio description and captioning, and so on and so on and so on.

I guess another perspective on that is that there are a lot of ways to access a single thing and, without trying to excuse myself, I think you can experience a performance in different ways and there's a validity in that. I think there were a lot of components that I didn't see as part of the performance until they made themselves so, so as I was saying, the number of young people who worked on that team absolutely became a part of the work, and the carrying absolutely became a part of the work as well, which again I had thought was just a practical measure and then the very first time we did it, in fact the very first time we practised it the day before the performance, it very clearly fed the meaning of the work.

There's an ethic runs all the way through the performance, and I think a lot of the time we, all of us involved in it, we're learning about that as it went along. One of the things that stays with me most profoundly, and the thing where maybe I made some compromises that I do differently another time, was the ethic in relation to the team that I had. We witnessed today how profoundly those narratives affect people, and I know I got a bit hardcore, because I worked on the narratives for the last several years, I've visited them again and again. I can still work on them and suddenly be absolutely floored by them, but I think I hadn't quite realised what a demanding thing it was for people coming into the project to work with them. I'm not sure yet what I do differently, but I think every performance, every work of activism throws up ethical questions, and you think in advance what you might meet along the way and put things in place and then it will always throw up other things because that's the nature of the liveness of this sort of work.

Q: I just find it interesting the connection of the support that you mentioned that people aren't getting in austerity programs and of you having that support and being able to be carried down, and

seeing the difference of what, if you can pull that support literally out from under you, what happens then to that prospect.

Liz: it was a really interesting experience as well, because I needed a higher level of assistance to do that performance then I do in the rest of my life, and I think when you're experiencing a type of assistance you haven't had before, there's always a certain amount of emotional and mental processing that has to go along with it, and a lot of people of course would have said lifting me was about my vulnerability, the loss of my dignity, but actually it was incredibly revealing that the way we worked as a team, an immensely cooperative way, was incredibly dignified for everybody involved in it, and where we had to cooperate to be safe going down the stairs and across the foreshore, it was a complete team effort. They were as dependent on me as I was on them for us to be safe, and I found that a really exciting part of the project, partly because it was unexpected, that it just revealed so much about the kind of values that I wanted to demonstrate through the work.

Jess: Another thing that came up that was unexpected, that linked in really nicely with the work, was that when we were carrying Liz up and down these very steep metal slippery wet steps, so many times members of the public would say, oh can we help you, let us help, let us do something, and that was really nice because we didn't expect it and that then engaged with another way for conversation to start and then they would get involved with the project in that way.

Liz: But not with the lifting! [laughter]

Robert: It's important to think that the foreshore was one space of the larger performance, but so were the conversations that were happening up above, and those conversations involved both able-bodied and disabled people, passersby, and those conversations, which were completely unpredictable in some ways, I think intentionally were part of the larger performance.

Q: How do the materials of the figures themselves impact the message of the project? How did you decide on mud for the figures?

Liz: The symbolism was really strong in the use of mud. So I looked at prehistoric mud figures. The idea of people, of human beings, having come out of the mud is something that you find in cultures all around the world, and I really wanted to put across the idea of the lifecycle in the work I was doing - so the idea of digging out the mud, creating the figures, 'giving birth' to the figures, then watching them go through this process of hardship until eventually it crushes them down, and then returned back to where they came from. So the materials were really key in trying to embed the idea of these human beings. But there was also something about how tactile it was, and working with natural materials in natural spaces, that really drew people to the project. It was a really beautiful, exciting material to work with, much more exciting than had it been commercially prepared clay, because it felt rooted in the earth and it felt rooted in that idea of people over time, that we come from this huge history, and at one level what we're dealing with in austerity is a moment in time, a tiny thing and yet it wreaks this devastation. So there's a responsibility now to get it right, and there's also a sense in which it is part of this much, much bigger trajectory that human beings make.

I think the materiality of the clay drew people into the conversations. One person, who just happened to walk across the foreshore, was very excited because she was an archaeologist and she was saying there would've been people here all those years ago doing exactly what you're doing, making little human figures from the same material, so there were all those kind of connections that came out of it that were not strictly speaking about austerity, but were able to feed the conversations and the recognition of the stories in the narrative that they were people like us.

Q: You mentioned your prior work *Resistance, on the Plinth*. I was wondering if you could tell us just a little bit about your own thinking on connections between those works, like obviously *Figures* is a response to an imminent crisis that you wanted to take up, but you've been doing this other historical work and I wonder if you could help us think about why that historical work matters in relationship to this effort of contemporary crisis and activism that you're talking about.

Liz: I think a lot of activism is put across as issues-based, and I think I'm really interested in a values-based activism. If you look at the values that underpin austerity, they're really very similar to the values that underpin the Holocaust. They are about certain groups of people being more valuable than others, they're about priorities of society, how we relate to each other, how far we're willing to go to assert a master race or an elite, so I actually think the issues of those two different parts of history are incredibly similar. If you go back to looking at the Holocaust, sometimes when we read about the history, it's as though there was a day when things were okay and then there was a day when there was the Holocaust, and of course the reality is that there was a buildup of events, there was a buildup of the ideology that allowed the most heinous events to happen. But they began with a separating of groups in society, they began with the polarising, they began with the propaganda, and that built up and built up, and when austerity was first brought in, in the very earliest stages listening to the propaganda, particularly having come out of my previous projects, I could feel the warning signals that I'd come across, and looking at the history, I could see us starting to creep up the kind of ladder, and whilst clearly the most extreme was some way off, it seemed to me that alerting people to the dangers early on is always a really important thing to do.

There's a German phrase that translates to 'beware the beginning', and that really stuck with me when I was working on the *Resistance* project, that if you don't attend to now and those very earliest signals, then you permit worse things to happen. So for me, it all comes down to the values, and in the conversations we have, underpinning that is this idea of who do we want to be, what kind of society do we want to be, and the conversations that happen through the activism I do, at some level all touch on that fundamental question of who are we, who do we want to be and, crucially, what do we do to make that happen?

Q: There was a part towards the end – please correct me if I get the paraphrase wrong – where there was a line about having to bend facts and we all know this is currently the country of alternative facts, and that kind of language worries me in a lot of ways, it worries me at a very basic level. So I'm just wondering if you could speak to what that actually means, and then the potential danger of that kind of approach, which is something that I feel on a daily basis in this particular city, in this particular moment in history.

Liz: I'm glad you picked up on it because I think my wording there was deliberately provocative, but I think for all the things you just said, we are living in this post-truth society where facts are becoming harder and harder to feel secure about, yet more and more important for that very reason. I think what I specifically wanted to say in relation to activism and the work of *Figures* is that, as with anything, you make choices about what to present and what kind of interpretation to bring to it, so there are things I knowingly do and don't do, there are ways I present and don't present in order to give the best chance of drawing people in and having the conversations that I think really urgently need to happen. So if that means kind of going in disguise on that foreshore, looking as though I am just this slightly unusual person sitting on the foreshore, modelling clay, if that's a way of bringing in people to conversations that they might never choose to have in any other place, then that's a kind of subterfuge that I feel I can justify. Equally, if the language I use to present the project is slightly softening what the project is really about, again if it opens up those conversations, if it enables conversations with people who might otherwise be afraid of something that feels too hardcore or too political, then I feel that that's again a justification for the kind of bigger picture. So I am

thinking, always, about ways in to conversation, and especially conversation with people who wouldn't knowingly seek it on the subject of the work. For the reasons you said, it's really important that when it comes to the crunch you can justify the decisions you've made and the interpretations you give to it, and clearly the work is positioned – I'm taking a position on austerity, so it's not neutral – but I will work very carefully with facts in how I construct it.

Q: I'm a little curious right at the end of your talk, at the bottom of your contacts slide, I noticed that you're working collaboration with the Arts Council of England, and that either this work or other works have been public lotto funded. I'm curious if you can speak a little bit about what your relationship with the Arts Council of England is, given that I know here in the United States the NEA (National Endowment for the Arts] is under pressure internally to not fund any project that has overt political message combo whether it be pro GOP, anti-Trump, et cetera, so I'm curious: you just mentioned softening your language in response to this other question, how is your artistic work represented in that space?

Liz: You might partially have answered that with the softening of the language thing. So the Arts Council of England was the primary funder of *Figures*, along with another agency that also uses money from the National Lottery. The Arts Council money came for all of the creative aspects of the work, so it paid for the team, the materials, travel and so on, and that was relatively straightforward and I didn't particularly have to soft pedal the politics for that. For the other funding strand, I was particularly trying to get money to enable the conversations side of it, and there I really soft pedalled, talking about education and awareness raising, about things like poverty, and I definitely didn't use words like austerity, and I did not use neoliberalism [laugher], and so it became a kind of 'do gooder' project, and I'd managed to get 'do gooder' money [laughter] through them before on projects, such as going to Germany to visit the death centres related to the Holocaust and putting that across as a project that was nice because it was putting together a group of disabled people to look at our history, but it didn't talk about what we were really doing with the knowledge that we were going to get there and why it was so important. I think maybe we have been fortunate relative to the States in that there is a history of public funding for the arts that goes back a long way and has been much more secure. Obviously, austerity has had a significant impact on that, but it still exists, and it's a relatively liberal, progressive funding strand. It is possible to do stuff that challenges the status quo and I think as artists we maybe don't realise how lucky we are in still having that. It's back to the previous question, isn't it? It's all in the presentation and I suppose it's a kind of ends justifying the means.

Robert: I'm thinking, with this question on your answer, about the long tradition of the artist biting the hand that feeds and specifically when ACT UP, AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, was invited into MOMA in New York, and the main image that survives, the one that is the most iconic from that moment of being invited inside to the official space of Momo, is just block letters with '10,000 DEAD: ART IS NOT ENOUGH, which they made into an art piece, in recognisable Act Up art, which sent this recognisable message that, yes, I'll take that money but, yes, I'm also engaged in this very different activist project here.

Liz: I think it's known that artists have a role in being subversive, so actually the funding sector should recognise that and give leeway to it. We'll see what happens when I put in my next funding application… [laughter]

Q: You're talking a lot about reconstituting materials, moving forward to your projects being very interconnected on this austerity project, so what's next, not only for you specifically, and where do you think things are going in terms of an activist artist landscape, not just you specifically, how do you see this project, despite being this transitory thing that returns to its original state, living on as

you move forward, or affecting people as you move on, as these stories that are connected with it continue to do so?

Liz: I'm doing a very, very slow PhD and it's practice led research, so *Figures* has been at the core of that, and I'm looking at that form of activism and trying to conceptualise it as a methodology of activism. So, as my primary work at the moment, I have just been editing a moving image work that uses footage from that performance, so that's my next thing, to start getting that out there. And then hoping, when the doctorate's over, that some creative something will bubble up, because I have no ideas left… [laughter].

In terms of the artist activist landscape, where's that going?… That's really tough.

Jess: She's lost her voice now! [laughter]

Liz: I can't say I know where it's going. I think there's more and more call upon it. I think traditionally a lot of non-artist activists have had an antipathy to the idea of artists doing activism, and a lot of artists have felt the same, that art can't be positioned and can't state strong opinions about something, and I think as more artists and activists combine and overlap work, there may be an increasing acknowledgement that there's value in that currency, that it can do things that traditional activism, or traditional art, can't do. My hope for it, rather than predicting where it is going to go, is that there's going to be more and more possibilities for developing the power that art has as an activist tool. It does things that conventional activism can't do, it can get under the skin in a different way, it can be subtle and creep up on people, it can work overtime, it can bring in humour (not that conventional activism can't as well); it's a kind of multifaceted tool used well and I think probably, as a community, artists and activists have only really just scratched the surface on that. Hopefully people will come in with really vivid imaginations and really take us by surprise.

Robert: Our conversation has got so engrossing that I've realised we're actually over time…