

Introduction

[Izzy:] *“Though we know about [climate change], we don’t know about it. It hasn’t registered in our gut; it isn’t part of our culture. Where are the books? The poems? The plays? The goddamn operas?”* - Bill McKibben in 2005

My name is Izzy Inkpen and I’m an inter-disciplinary artist focusing on environmentalism. In June 2020 I interviewed 8 activists and artists who work on disability rights and environmentalism. I also contacted several other activists in these areas whose views informed the creation of this final piece as well as my own. In order of their first appearance, the interviewees are:

Iona MacPherson - composer and mental health campaigner

Tolmeia Gregory - environmental activist and digital artist

Polly Creed - theatre maker, producer and activist

Liam O’Dell - mildly Deaf journalist and campaigner

Sharlene Gandhi - freelance writer with focus on environment, race, and small business

Ellen Jones - campaigner, writer and speaker on LGBT rights, mental health and disability

Katie Pennick - disabled campaigner and journalist

Samia Dumbuya - climate justice activist

Frustrations and hopes for COVID

I think there's a lot more frustration than hopes **OVERLAID** more frustrations than hopes.

I think primarily like so many people I feel really angry and upset. The biggest kind of frustration has been around the lack of accessible information regards to the government's handling of the situation. There's been a lot of pessimism about how our institutions and governments have gone about this opportunity, this sort of once in a lifetime opportunity that we had to reverse the climate crisis. I think it's frustrating to see that the government can act with a sense of urgency when there's something directly affecting them, they're actually showing that they can put things into place in order to protect us. But when it comes to the climate crisis where, in the UK especially, we're in the privileged position where it's not directly affecting us right now, it can't seem to act on mitigating things for the future and that's very frustrating. My environmental activism is strongly intertwined and based on my beliefs in social and economic justice and I think that the response to COVID in this country has been appalling. The government has systematically failed black and Asian

people, it's systemically failed elderly and vulnerable people, it's failed women, it's failed people with disabilities. And as always they prioritize GDP and income over the lives and the quality of life of the most vulnerable. We only have to look at the sorts of large-scale enterprises that have been bailed out, whether that's airlines in the UK or oil and gas companies in the states, it's seen in a vacuum. So the response to COVID-19 has largely been to do with dealing with the immediate effects and not necessarily strategising for the long-term impacts that the crisis is going to have, but moreover it's failed to look at the fact that the pandemic affected marginalised people significantly more. It's just a lack of understanding, a lack of foresight, a lack of planning, and from speaking to so many disabled people in a whole range of different situations, there is this overwhelming feeling of just being completely forgotten about.

So I just think it's really kind of harrowing seeing how this has played out and, in a way, exaggerated issues have been exacerbated so much so many of the inequalities and injustices OVERLAID injustices and the issues that deaf people face I think the pandemic highlighted the cracks of society because environmental justice is social justice. It isn't just about plants and animals, it's about the people and the planet itself like the relationship between the two.

However, I'm also cautiously optimistic. So I think what this might have done is it might have clarified kind of very violently the cost of putting profit before life, I think having the whole population experience a barrier to what they would usually do, I think has been quite eye-opening for some; but it is an experience of having a barrier put to what you want to do, something that is outside of your control and something that is in society; a taste of that vulnerability.

we've also realised is the sort of emotional value that comes with slowing down and you know we don't necessarily need to be darting all over the place in order to be happy. You can recraft your definition of happiness that doesn't necessarily include things like foreign travel or indulgent experiences that we've traditionally grown up to associate with success and with happiness, so I think that's been really powerful for a lot of people. People have been forced to be creative with the way they contribute to the environmental movement and I've seen lots of more interactions between people in Europe and people across other continents as well. So I've been seeing more and more activists from the Global South be more involved which is one of the good things that have come out from COVID. I think people keep talking about the new normal, at some point they'll decide that the COVID response is done and everything will go back to normal there's gonna be a new normal that's happening, we're not going to go back to our old way of life; how can you go back to normal when normal was so horrendous in the first place? But I think the crisis has actually given people who maybe have privilege and who aren't aware of the issues going on, the time to reflect OVERLAID chance to reflect to think about how we can change behaviour, how we can reshape society, because this clearly is not working.

There's sort of an equal shred really of pessimism and optimism, or hopes and frustrations if you like, in that from the bottom-up I see a lot of potential change; we're seeing normal people realising it's a big issue from the top-down I don't necessarily see it in that respect, when it comes to the government, when it comes to high-level officials it doesn't seem to be moving as quickly or at all. As an activist I don't look to the government for permission to act in a certain way, I think especially

the government we have now I don't particularly want to always look at what they have to say

Art in activism

Activism is essentially, I see it as creative problem-solving; it's working out - you've got a problem and how can you creatively approach it to solve the issue? And it's often through means that aren't necessarily conventional. I think for me in a weird way, I was never really that creative until I started campaigning and I started doing activism because that necessitated me to think about how I wanted to communicate messages that were complicated and difficult but in an accessible way. That's the role that the writing plays, for me, that interplay between creativity and making sure you're actually communicating something useful. I just think art is such a powerful tool when it comes to talking about these issues. Mental health is often spoken about in quite a scientific, quite an inaccessible and academic way, which means that the average person and the average young person in particular won't really have the vocabulary or education to be able to access that information. Art is accessible; it's visual, it's eye-catching, it's just different and I feel like it engages with lots of people from different communities, rather than me just reading out statistics and reciting government documents at people. Musically I want to try and make those conversations more accessible and make those feelings seem more natural than they do when you're reading through a 40 page paper. They were more than just a fun little illustration and more of a labeling device and a tool to actually carry on the conversations in a really easy and accessible way. That wasn't until I realised I could incorporate that into a form of activism in itself.

I think there is such power in hearing people tell their own stories and something that I've always, always - literally this is a lifelong feud I've had with the media and journalism - is this very voyeuristic or othering approach to covering topics about disability. I think the stories and language really shape who we are and what we do, so whose stories we tell and what the stories look like and sound like, and the perspectives they're coming from change behaviour. I think when it comes to activism I'm sort of quite interested in how communication works and I don't mean that in the bog-standard way of giving someone a call or writing an email, but really how does somebody ingest the information that you're receiving - or they're receiving rather - and do something with it. And I think we live in a world where there are thousands and thousands of ways to do that, but we don't always use them in the best way. I think they're also things that bring me great joy, and I think for our activism to be sustainable it has to bring us joy and it has to be well informed,

I think theatre writing as a medium as opposed to other art forms, I like because it offers a chance to engage in quite a complex, nuanced, and wriggly debate often, and it can be kind of discursive and you can get immediate feedback in a way that perhaps some other mediums don't really offer you the chance to kind of tackle complexity in the same way, and so that's what I like about writing in theatre. You know you're in an auditorium with probably a couple of hundred people sharing a collective experience - a collective live experience sorry - and I think I found that quite an exciting thing to explore. So my work in relation to arts journalism and campaigning in particular it's been encouraging more of the captioned performances or more access provisions for deaf and hard of

hearing people. So yeah it's often been about kind of ensuring that theatres have a very considered approach to making their content – whether that's online or whether that be on the stage – as accessible as possible

Access to art during COVID

In terms of specifically art itself I think it's been great to actually see theatre performances put online and access to books being available. I think it's really interesting how, for example, institutions like museums and galleries - how the access to art that disabled people and other folks have been asking for for years and been told was completely impossible, suddenly became possible when able-bodied folks were asking for it. I think it shows how much better it would be if those were readily available anyway and obviously funding and everything else has to come into that but I think it's shown how much people who cannot access, for example, theatre who can't pay for tickets, who can't get to London, for example, really want to engage with theatre. I think theatres need to work harder to make their spaces accessible - physically, economically, socially, culturally. I think it's also a model that only really works for the supersize big-budget theatre, which also really diminishes the diversity of voices and stories we see being told, it all becomes quite kind of homogeneous. I think it's just annoying that it's taken a pandemic for that resource to become available, because lots of people can't access the theatre. As theatres moved online at this time it has been very disappointing that the large majority of them still aren't captioned. It's just a shame that that kind of commitment and that awareness hasn't transitioned to online content. Especially when you know captioning and accessibility should always be considered from the get-go rather than it being something that is an afterthought or something which has to be reminded, or something deaf people or activists or disability campaigners have to remind the theatres about once the show has been put online. I think it's hopefully gonna make people re-evaluate what it means to engage with art and who can engage with art, because there is no part of, there's no theme in art I can think of where it wouldn't be, not only relevant to disabled people, but also really really important and also adding another layer of understanding and depth to think about “okay, well how does the disabled body interact with this art? How is this informed experience?” And I think museums have always kind of dismissed disabled people as something that are quite a rare occurrence or - you know disability is the largest minority group, it's a fifth of all people, a fifth of all adults and in for example LGBT communities that's a higher proportion. You can't really take a blanket approach to disability or to access when loads of different people have different access needs. But I think in terms of that, it's important that an environment is changed to suit the needs of the individual, rather than have the individual try to adjust or change to fit the environment. An environment is much easier to adapt and to mould and shape to suit the needs of individuals, rather than have a disabled individual go out of their way to access something that still remains inaccessible to them.

I think often when theatre is live-streamed, it's done in a very kind of conventional way; and it's just a play that's filmed on stage. I do wonder where theatre will be going next in terms of digital content, because I know the National Theatre for example in the past I think kind of said “oh we're not really looking into moving more of our content online now, not just yet” but then obviously

Coronavirus happened and that switch has now happened. So I'd be intrigued to see how theatres pursue digital content going forward as a way to generate income or generate interest or whatsoever. I am really excited by other digital formats and mediums, for example the rise of audio dramas and podcasts; I think it's really challenging the way we tell stories and again, like I said, making us think about what's worth telling and how we tell it. I've seen lots of great art online and yeah it's been beautiful to see as well, I've seen lots of activists from the African continent take pictures of their lands and talk about how it's important to protect these lands and I've seen more voices that you don't usually hear on the day-to-day basis before COVID, which is interesting. I don't know why that's the case but I've definitely seen more marginalized voices occupy digital spaces. Though ultimately I do think just with any kind of activism or any kind of theatre or artform, I think that there is something really irreplaceable about people gathering and sharing ideas and dismantling systems and stories and things together. So it's also made me cherish that more I think.

Creating art and change during COVID

I feel like digital spaces allow faster exchanges of information, whereas with a panel talk you have to like meet me at the end of the event, if you have time, and I will say stuff I recommend, whereas on Zoom I can literally just drop a link or share a Google Doc. I think it's been great, I've seen more and more people from that talk actually have online discussions on their own social media platforms, people have been very receptive to it and I don't think that would have happened if it was just a real life event. I think I've actually moved a lot of my writing and my words if you like - I think I've like moved away from writing and I'm just thinking words now - I've moved a lot of my words and my speaking to sort of Instagram Lives, a lot of short videos, captions I think can be really powerful when you use them well. It sort of goes back to what I was saying about the value that being succinct has in communication and getting a message across, and I think all of that really is just going to change journalism and activism for the better. Technically you know the physical way of recording has been very different obviously, because we weren't able to go into a studio to record so it's all, as we're doing right now, recording remotely over Zoom and doing simil-recs in that way. So that's the biggest difference I've seen, which is I think brilliant in a way, because it means you have access to people that you wouldn't have had access to otherwise. I took part in a panel talk with the Courtauld Gallery and it was about what museums can do more about climate change. So before COVID I don't think I would have got the space I would have got on the panel. It was because of COVID I got the space on the panel because they, I think before they were just accessing people within arm's reach, but then when COVID happened they looked for people online and then I was approached for it and I was able to be part of the discussion. I think it's made people re-evaluate how effective online things can be if done well. We see a lot of things like "tweeting isn't social action etc etc" which I personally see as really quite ableist. As young people we tend to prioritise opportunities that make us financially stable. We feel like the system that we live in doesn't permit us the time and the space to fully pour our efforts into causes that we truly care about. So I guess that kind of links into COVID right now, where people are given the time and space and I've seen a rupture of voices in the climate justice movement and it has been so beautiful to see

online as well. I've seen lots of digital art, I've just seen lots of artists speak out against this and I guess a couple of years ago I didn't think that was the case, I didn't think many people cared, but I was wrong - I just think people needed the time and space to raise their voices about it. We've all now, due to lockdown, had a taste of what it's like to have a barrier to the things that we want to do, so I think it might have shifted - maybe, maybe shifted people's perspective a little bit, and that's what we're really looking for as disabled activists, it's just a little bit of a shift that we can hook onto and run with and build momentum on. So obviously we're going to take this as an opportunity and try and tap into people's empathy and understanding that way.

But I've also weirdly used my online platforms less, and I think that's because so many of us are online because we don't really have anything else to do or we want ways to fill our time, that it's kind of become overwhelming. Like there are so many resources being posted and so many thoughts constantly just being posted because everybody is just on social media that it's become a bit overwhelming to constantly be taking that in and constantly refreshing. At the start of lockdown I very much found that art wasn't - I wasn't really focused on activism as much because I was just dealing with being thrown into self isolation and living on my own and I just didn't have the capacity to really do it, so gradually as I moved through things and got more used to the situation, I did come back to art more specifically. And I think it wasn't necessarily for other people at that point either, it was just myself and my own creativity, I found that I really needed to get hands-on with it, and I did collaging and things like that. I've been experimenting with things that really are not part of my creative lexus at all; I did some workshops on illustration and literally just scribbles of urban places, which I just found to be so soothing. It was more about that sense of comfort that I think creativity brings for me just having that time where you're not constantly clock watching, you're not constantly thinking what's coming next, has been monumental I think for me,

But I also think a lot of people have found different ways to artistically express themselves, so like things that aren't necessarily as commonly viewed as artistic expression like knitting and crochet and baking OVERLAID baking banana bread or people growing stuff in their garden which can also be really helpful coping tools, whilst also being artistic. It's people being, I don't know, self-sufficient and not relying on these systems that are around us like going to the supermarket to buy herbs and stuff it's like "no, you can just do that yourself." I think yeah that's actually a really cool aspect of it even though planting stuff isn't necessarily art, but it's that hands-on like "oh I can actually do things myself now that I have the time."

Effect on young emerging artists

It's just literally been that a blessing of time to write, and then redraft, and then try different sentence structures, and going back to what I was saying earlier about trying out new mediums. I would not have had the time to do that had I been on autopilot like I normally am. So just having that space really to be creative and to experiment is a massive blessing. I think it's been a great outlet. It's given me a chance to feel like I'm able to do something, I'm able to, you know, artistically

reflect, I'm able to do things when kind of physically I'm confined, being able to really think about the outside world and things through writing. I think it's also, you know, In some ways lockdown and all of these things have probably aggravated and kind of exaggerated some of the things I find most difficult about writing in theatre. And I think it's also really made me think about, it's made me distill what I care about in storytelling, what are the things that are necessary for me to carry out my work, and what is worth doing. So I think it's been half and half; I think I've definitely seen more art and writing surrounding difficulties in mental health but at the same time I've seen a lot of stuff on social media from people who are having to take time off to just focus on themselves and their health, I think both of those things are important but I think it's it's important to acknowledge both sides because whilst I've heard a lot of people say "oh lockdown is really great you can just focus," when you're dealing with anxiety, for example, that for me personally has been heightened right now, I find it really difficult during a pandemic and also with everything going on with Black Lives Matter as a black woman to just focus, and I think that's a difficulty in artistic expression.

I think it's really just so devastating for them to be honest, for small organizations, for fringe theatres, for charities as well, things like youth groups as well that do a lot of outreach work; already we're seeing theatres, particularly regional ones, I know Nuffield Southampton Theatre have gone into administration. For example as a theatre composer and writer, I was meant to be taking my own show to the [Edinburgh] Fringe this year. It had been really difficult to even get it to the stage of being able to be funded because it's a show about race and a lot of people were quite hesitant to put their money there and I'd been through a lot to try and get to that stage, got a venue and everything, and then the Fringe is cancelled, which obviously it's cancelled for everyone, but when you're starting or trying to build, that would have been an amazing opportunity and that being ripped out from under you kind of means you have to start adapting to other things, and then readapting to whatever lockdown or whatever easing measures are being put in place. And I think it's interesting to be able to adapt right at the beginning of your career because you don't have those set ways of doing things and I like being able to do that. But I do think this is really important because it's in these spaces where kind of activist work and grassroots work are really incubated, it's the places where ideas are kind of fostered and allowed to grow, and if we don't have these kind of spaces that allow people to take risks, that support people that are just starting out, and that are great at really supporting diverse, emerging talent; it's going to have a massive impact throughout our arts and culture and it will have a knock-on effect on TV and film and kind of mass popular culture.

Life and art after lockdown

The general conversation about like how things are going to go after this, because I don't think anything's returning to normality after this and I think mental health and art are weirdly two groups, or two sectors, that shouldn't go back to the way they were before things. They were both too incredibly inaccessible, I guess, areas both to partake in, to get help from, to access. As a disabled person I've often been in jobs where I've requested home working or remote working, I've

requested this type of support in the workplace and employers have gone “oh sorry this is this is quite a tricky procedure to negotiate, this is quite a different, difficult support mechanism to introduce.” But yet as soon as the Coronavirus pandemic happened, employers across the country are now kind of dropping everything and looking into setting up remote working. The question that we are now going to ask you, if you now refuse us access in the future, is we’ll say well, you did it during Coronavirus, why can’t you do it now? it will be interesting to see what learnings government service providers and others have taken away from this time in terms of accessibility and what they’re going to implement going forwards. And I hope, obviously, that some of those learnings and some of those considerations are considerations of the needs of Deaf and disabled people.

I think that is why the role of activists and artists is really important in kind of contextualising what’s going on and thinking about coronavirus, not only as an awful pandemic, but also how it’s part of a wider picture of globalization, of neoliberalism, of capitalism, of all these things and how that’s manifested itself and also, as I said, all the inequalities that have been exacerbated by it, so all the issues of race and class and gender, how all of that’s been worsened by it. I don’t know I think it’s gonna require people to reevaluate the fact that country and I think it’s gonna need - especially in Britain - deconstruct the idea that Britain is great, I think that it is about balancing COVID and climate and I think it’s important for people to remember that it’s okay to speak about both at the same time. It’s not like talking about climate is distracting from this current issue because that takes away from the fact that they are very much connected in terms of things like social justice and things like health care. It’s really important to not shy away from having the conversations we’ve been having for years just because we’re now experiencing something specific to this time

I guess like from what I’ve observed from COVID is that young people do have voices. Obviously I knew that the whole time, but it’s interesting that when sometimes I go to events regarding climate justice and things like that, they always talk about like “oh young people aren’t speaking up enough, we need to like give them the platform, we need to like empower them.” And to be fair the young people I’ve come across online and in real life they are already empowered, they have voices, it’s just that adults tend to shut them down really quickly. I’ve seen amazing things on platforms like tik-tok, Instagram, and Twitter where young people are literally creating new ways of spreading information. I know when there was a Black Lives Matter protest in my town I was more - it felt better for me to go to that locally than it was to travel down to London and be amongst thousands of people, even though that’s something I would have done before. So that was quite interesting I was like “ I can’t quite justify that right now, because there is still this, there is still a virus about, we still have to be cautious.” Hopefully though I think it will, when it comes to galleries and museums and things, it will hopefully make people appreciate them more when they do start going back to them. I think it’s gonna be really difficult because I definitely see how there would be a bounceback, but the situation that a lot of people are going to be in financially and a lot of institutions and theatres and art centres are gonna be in financially, might just mean that that’s not possible.

I think people creating with constraints and with fewer materials and resources; it’s really exciting in developing an environmentally focused practice, and it’s showing that collaboration across the country and across the globe is possible without travel and you might just have to work differently

and think of it creatively about it. I think that really the whole system should just be overhauled and rebuilt to make it more accessible and more economically viable for everyone involved but that involves a whole restructuring of the entire system I guess. I have hope, basically, for the future because young people - we're just tired *laughs* we're just tired of everything and we have the creativity and the tools to make change.