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Episode 89: Accessibility in The Arts

Host: Harry Giles – **HG**

Guests: Abi Palmer – **AP** & Andra Simons – **AS**

Producer: David Turner - **DT**

Introduction:

DT: Hello this is the Lunar Poetry Podcast, I'm David Turner. Today's episode focuses on accessibility at live events. Today's host is Harry Giles and they are joined by poets, Andra Simons and Abi Palmer. The discussion looks at ways that live arts and literature events can be made more accessible to performers and audiences alike, as well as what the term actually means when applied to such events.

This is by no means a definitive conversation. Everyone involved with this episode welcomes anyone that wishes to continue the conversation online. You can reach Harry on Twitter at @HarryGiles all one word. And as always you can reach us at @Silent_Tongue on Twitter and Lunar Poetry Podcasts on Facebook, Soundcloud and Tumblr, as well as being able to subscribe to us on iTunes for Apple users, and Stitcher for Android users. Remember to tell your friends, yeah. Cheers. There will be a full transcript of this conversation for download which you can find via a link in the description box for this episode. Enjoy.

Conversation:

HG: Okay. Welcome. I'm Harry Giles and I'm here with Andra Simons and Abi Palmer to do the accessibility chat for Lunar Poetry. So let's introduce ourselves. Andra do you want to say a bit about what you do?.

AS: I'm Andra Simons, I'm a writer but more focusing on poetry. Background in theatre. Currently working on my latest, sort of, series of poems called *Turtle Man* looking at displacements and um *island-ness* as I tend to say.

HG: Abi, what about you?

AP: Yeah I'm, I guess I would term myself as an interactive poet. I'm very interested in the way language can be altered. Our experience of language and poetry can be altered by, multi-sensory experiences. My most recent project *Alchemy* was about the way a poem can be changed by different sensory inputs and I'm, sort of, moving more in that direction. To understand how our physical experience changes what we hear.

HG: Fantastic. And I'm Harry. I'm a writer and performer, I'm based in Edinburgh where I do a bit of production of other people as well, and a lot of ranting on the internet which is one of the reasons, I think, I've ended up hosting this podcast which is about accessibility in the broadest sense and we're going to focus the conversation or at least start the conversation talking about disability accessibility and both when it's done well and it's done badly. But we're also interested and going to explore a wider approach to accessibility and how class and gender and race and age and all of these similar vectors of marginalization can also affect accessibility and how we can take account of them.

So I've written some questions to get us started and were going to start with the positives and the reason for this is when a bunch of people get together to talk about accessibility often we start with what I think of as the accessibility moan where we share all of the horror stories of which there are, very unfortunately, many. But just to change the frame of the

conversation, and we are going to do that, I thought I'd start by asking Abi and Andra, what is the single best accessibility experience that you have had in the arts?

AP: I have a really good one. I did a gig with the *Sisters Uncut* occupation in Peckham a while back and it was the most... I recently at that point I had moved into an electric wheelchair for the first time. I was very uncomfortable in that I'd never performed in a wheelchair before and it was the first time I really needed to. Luckily it was in an occupation in an occupied space that they didn't need to have made wheelchair accessible. They not only made it accessible but made sure on all of their Facebook invites on all of their events promotion that it was very notably accessible and they also made it a female and non-binary space only, and in our preparation for the performance the event's promoter emailed me and talked to me about trigger warnings and making it a safe space.

Actually as a result all of the performers found that because we were allowed to discuss trigger warnings in advance we were able to all be ourselves a lot more and were able to have conversations that perhaps, live on stage you wouldn't normally feel comfortable in having. I came onto the stage in my wheelchair and was able to get up and move around and get back into it. But I was also allowed to be myself in terms of the other types of issues which come up.

When you're performing you put yourself into a persona and sometimes professionalism doesn't always equal disabled or traumatised or suffering. And I think that being... having the conversation in advance about this is what we're allowed to talk about and this is how we're going to frame it meant that everybody that evening went away feeling nurtured and having really honest… It was the most honest performance I'd ever done.

HG: That's a really wonderful story and I think it's lovely to kind of start with that point of accessibility even around something that has become as frustratingly debated as trigger warnings. Not as something that is supposed to, like, limit programmers or shut down performers or put constraints on speech. But as something that when you do it right amplifies speech and amplifies diversity and amplifies and strengthens the conversations that we can have.

And that's what my hope for accessibility is and I think that's a really great kind of attitude to come in to it with. And what about you Andra? What's your, sort of, best experience of access?

AS: I think it's probably around a mutual friend of ours, Sandra Alland. The last three programmes I was a part of, that Sandra had programmed me… The first one being *Cachín Cachán Cachunga* in Glasgow. Then there was *Seep* in Edinburgh and *Who's Your Dandy* as well in Edinburgh. And it's more than just the particular programmers. I've long admired how Sandra approaches from the beginning to the end. Um, programming her events and it's everything from who's going to perform and really researching and going out and discovering and making sure that who's on the bill, that she has a wide range.

And it's not about ticking boxes but it's about, if I can afford in a space to people who deserves [inaudible] that deserves a voice, who should have a voice, who should have that

chance, and making sure that in a two-hour space that there's a wide range of voices. And I really admire beginning there and that as well as making sure that the spaces are accessible, everything from wheelchairs to hearing-impaired, sight-impaired. All that is sorted and thought through very, very meticulously from her end. And all three events I've been with I've thoroughly enjoyed. And I think for me she set the model and there was many things I had never thought about that now when I think about a gig I actually, I hear her voice in my head, it's like that voice on my shoulder, you know, and it's sort of like… If they invited me does it have wheelchair access? Is there a BSL interpreter? You know it's all these things that I hadn't really thought about before that now become...

She's now one of many voices in my head that become, you know, in terms of when an event is happening and how to approach it how to make sure that it's accessible or like, for example, I'm not the only *token* on the programme, are people that there's all sorts... That I trust that the programmer has really thought about who's going to be onstage as well.

HG: Sandra's had a similar influence on me in how I do programming and producing as well. And I've learned a lot from Sandra's work and I'm really grateful for it. I'm going to pull in from something else which is an event that happened in Glasgow recently run by an organisation called *Arika* and it was a weekend of talks and discussions and performances called *Refuse Power's Grasp*. That was about the connections between prison abolition politics and a radical racial politics and a radical queer and trans politics as well, and bringing all of those together, it was quite an amazing weekend, and in a major publicly funded venue.

And there was a lot of messaging in all of the run up to that event around accessibility from multiple directions so it was a free event, all of the venues had step-free access, but they also, there were some of those basic infrastructures in there, but also they just had this repeated message of if there is anything we can do to make you able to come, or if you feel like you might not be able to come and want to, please get in touch and we'll help.

And I saw that message over and over again and it did take repeating. And the more the event was advertised the more I realized it was going to be really, really popular and crowded. And it's also a free event which is great for access but also often means that you have these huge crowds trying to get into a small space and sometimes that can be an access nightmare.

So I wrote to them and eventually it took me a long time to get the guts to write to them and said, "So when venues are really packed and crowded sometimes I have panic attacks and it'd be really nice if I could come to your events without having to stand around in really noisy crowds and be kind of crushed through a door. And I was also wondering if maybe you had like a quiet space that people can sit in where it isn't going to be really loud." And they got back to me really, really quickly and said, "Yes we'll just reserve you a seat that's totally fine. Have you got any friends that are coming that you want us to reserve a seat for beside you? We can do that too and there'll be a quiet space upstairs."

So they did all of that just like, quickly and I think they were doing a bunch of that anyway. And then when I got there, one of the programmers clocked me and just came on over and

had a quick chat with me about it just in a really personable way. And it just made me feel so welcomed and looked after and cared for.

And I know quite a few people with different disabilities and different access needs had quite similar experiences so that they were looking after it both in an organisational way but also in a personal way that makes a difference because I think at heart access is about learning how to treat everyone around you as a human who deserves connection. And that there are loads of different types of humans and your assumption about what a human might need is usually wrong. You have to actually listen to what they need and then try and help. So yeah, it was, that was a really good experience.
And what did, what do either of you think about what's kind of common between those stories, what do they tell us about access?

AP: I think listening, listening... exactly what you've just said, the idea of assuming nothing but making as much information readily available from the beginning as both a promoter for performers and a promoter for audience members, stating what you are able to provide, what you may not be able to provide, and... and, a contact for, if you have a need please ask in advance. All of those things are really important and as...

Sorry I just went into a loop in my head there. Yeah. Listening, listening to what people want, listening to what people need and making sure that when you set up a platform as Andra said, not a token gesture but this is actually in the ethos, the core of what we want to be happening.

AS: And also being aware of where your faults are as an organiser and if you don't, if you, if you search do you have a space that isn't accessible say it. Be upfront and say it and know that maybe the next time that you will search either we… or don't advertise because you may have a BSL interpreter, that it's accessible. Where you can't have wheelchair users coming in or, do you know what I mean? You have to know where your limits are. And letting people know and letting an audience know and letting...

But yet, always knowing that the intention hopefully is that you're growing from there, that you're developing from there. If that is what your aim is. I feel like if you wish to widen your audience you have to be aware of that. You have to be able to be truthful with yourself as an organisation or as a person organising. Where you are and where you're going. I think people appreciate that as opposed to people trying to tick boxes or say that they're doing something when they're actually not. In a way, "We were, we did." You know?

AP: Or skimming over it

AS: Yeah.

HG: And I think part of both of those is knowing that no one person has all the answers. That, I think being able to admit that you don't know it all yet and it's not all in place yet. You don't have to do access perfectly to some access.

When we started taking it properly seriously for an event that I co-run in Edinburgh *Anatomy* , when we started taking access properly seriously we wrote up all of the access information that we currently have and at the bottom we said this is a work in progress. We know we haven't got anything and we know that we've probably made some mistakes and we really appreciate anyone telling us what we've got wrong and what we can do to improve.

And several times people have written to us and said, "thanks for what you're doing already, here's a thing where you missed a thing that would have been really helpful," and we've made changes and that's really helped. And that's an organisation incidentally where all of the people who run it have chronic illnesses or disabilities in some form, like different kinds of things and we don't know everything and we make mistakes, but that's okay.

AS: On another accessibility issue, a few years ago there was a man who puts together a well-known gay man's anthology, a British gay man's anthology. You know someone asked the person, "Why is it in the past anthologies, there hasn't been any black male voices really," and the person was saying, "Well I put calls out," then the person in question said, "so do you do you actually go approach people, if you know no one's coming to you? You could contact me, I have loads of, you know, quite an international reach."

And I think it's those sort of things but the person was in such denial about... I think because they didn't want to be labelled racist. Or that they were in such denial around that, that it's like you can't go anywhere because that means the person... Either they take it on board and then they, they say you know someone's actually offered me, reaching out and saying I'm going to take them up on it, or they will continue in many ways doing what they're doing.

From what I know it is in lots of ways continuing in the way that they're doing it because they're either afraid to go into the work of reaching out or something else is preventing them. But that's just another accessibility... Is, is people not, talking about what I was saying before, not being able to admit where they're faltering.

AP: I think that's, that's something that came up recently. I was working with somebody to put together a poetry project and we realised that our core line-up of people we were going to ask to perform were not entirely but majority white, cis-gender, able-bodied, heterosexual men from academic backgrounds. And we went actually, well this isn't ready yet then, we need to do more research. Yes, all of these people are capable of doing this job but that doesn't mean they're the best people for the job. Or it doesn't mean our approach... It's about asking yourself do these people... Yes, yes maybe they are capable of doing this but are there other people that I haven't been made aware of yet? Let's look for those people, let's do more searching before we release another anthology full of white, heterosexual, able- you know? Like we don't need more…

And it is not about ticking boxes, it's about saying, "But we've heard these voices, those voices exist. This isn't a new thing." For me that was important. So we haven't gone ahead with that aspect of the project until we're, until we're ready and we're asking the questions.

I'm not saying we're doing it right but we've at least started by admitting our, our flaws. I think that's an important thing.

HG: There's no shame in it.

AP: Yeah.

HG: Like, that's great, we're all flawed, we're all incomplete. I feel like part of that as well is if you're doing an ongoing project, building diversity into your artists and into your audiences often takes a bit of time because you have to win trust in a lot of cases.

That's often the case with disability and it can be the case with kind of other lines of marginalisation as well. If all of the organisers come from a particular position of privilege they have to work extra hard to get diversity in because everyone's going to be worried that they're just the *token*, essentially. I've been there and if somebody invites me to talk on a panel about autism or whatever. I immediately think like, am I just there to be the one *token* with a bunch of doctors? Or is this something that's actually going to centre autistic people's experiences?

And I think because such a shallow approach to access and a shallow approach to diversity has become endemic in the arts that there's often a bit of suspicion. And if so, if you're doing a, if you're doing an ongoing thing you have to learn how to build trust. Who is the face of your organisation? How does your organisation present itself? How does it build trust over time?

How does it show that it's open to change and welcoming more people? Because those of us who suffer from one degree of repression or marginalisation or another have just got used to being let down over and over and over and over again and so we form our own spaces and we just got used to not being let into any other people's. Sorry, that's quite a negative vision of it.

AP: I think it's an interesting thing because within that I've also become very aware of a lot of platforms that have been made for people who are in these small minorities that create groups where they care for each other and look after each other. And there tends to be a lot of infighting about, "You've done this wrong." And it can become very aggressive.

I was trying to explain recently to somebody about how it feels, all those micro-aggressions every day like just getting into a bus on a wheelchair is a constant... You're being stared at every day. And so when something feels like a personal attack, after a few negative experiences your cortisol's risen, you're far more likely to hit back and be aggressive.

And as I've got older I've become the stereotypical angry disabled person on Facebook, my Twitter feed can be a negative experience sometimes. Actually what I think is important to do as well is sometimes get the balance right between, yes there's space for anger but there's also space to go look, there's a flaw here, there's a gap, but we're human, let's not attack each other, let's try to have a conversation.

Otherwise it's a small minority infighting with each other about micro-details and then on mainstream platforms everyone is totally oblivious to that argument because we're too busy having the minor conversation. And that's a very difficult line to tread, I don't know. I don't know how you go about having both of those conversations, you need space for both things.

HG: I'm going to steer us back to the positive end of things and then we'll go back there for a little bit and then we can go into the, into some of the, some of the angry ranting which I think we all need, we all need a bit of a vent here and there. What do you think, and you touched on this earlier Abi, what do you think are the artistic possibilities of wider accessibility? What does good accessibility add to a piece of art or to a piece of art's programming or producing? How can we think about accessibility not as limiting art but as amplifying and expanding?

AP: It's something that I think is really important is, the idea of how somebody else's experience can change your own performance, I suppose. I'm going to use an example, the project that I've been working on recently, *Alchemy*, is a one-on-one performance. It requires multisensory interruptions so I'm performing a poem to your face with potentially touch or potentially smell. And it's meant to be confrontational, I want people to be telling me I'm not enjoying this sometimes. But what I realised, and some, most people respond positively to that and I've specifically placed it in platforms where it's not just a poetry audience so that people who say, well I don't enjoy poetry, or I haven't had a good experience can talk differently about how poetry is.

And, for me, I thought OK I'm ticking all the right boxes here, this is a good conversation to be having. And then somebody came along and said well actually my neurological profile is different and you invading my physical space like this has been immensely uncomfortable. And I realised I hadn't asked permission to make that intrusion and by asking permission to intrude I don't think it would have changed the experience.

It could still have been a discussion about comfort and discomfort but I could have made that a less neurologically confrontational experience just by being aware of that conversation... I've lost track a little bit.

HG: No, I think you're totally making sense. You're sort of saying that by giving people an opportunity to consent and set their own boundaries you actually enable a deeper confrontation and you enable more types of confrontation because people have said, "Yes I'm willing to be confronted in this way."

AP: Yes exactly. Exactly yeah, and in terms of the artistic possibilities there, the moment you start to explore the neuro-diversity of voices and the voices that are within the poetry and the literary community, and how many different ways people can experience things, suddenly you've got this, like, incredibly wide platform.

I watched Melissa Lee-Houghton perform *I Am Very Precious* recently and it was like the most incredible experience to watch someone talk about and talk about their body and their experience and it's different from mine. But it's suddenly, the possibilities of that experience

being something that everybody in the room got to be part of, was so moving. Like, the room was utterly silent and you could feel like, chasms opening up inside. And that creates better art I think, the more, the more of that we have the better art becomes.

HG: And I think that relates also to what you were saying earlier about when you do access well, when you do when you do consent and boundaries well, you enable people to be more of themselves. You enable people to not limit parts of themselves. I was thinking about the *Arika* event that I mentioned earlier; because I felt welcomed, because I felt like my access needs had been taken care of I was so much more comfortable walking around with my big red ear-protectors on. Because I can't handle all the noise and all of the distraction. And I was like, "I'm just going to rock it out, I'm going to look really weird but that's fine because I'm actually welcome in this space." And when we welcome more types of people and enable them to be themselves then you have more of these encounters, that you talked about as a rupture…

What about you Andra, because we've been going at it.

AS: I guess I'm sort of stating the obvious when I talk about what the audience gets from that. That sort of variety. I mean, I think I just saw, I saw a *Star Trek* episode. You know, where they landed on this planet that was... Where people were trading in stories and trading in other people's [experiences]. And that became this high value thing. Other people's lived experience became really this thing that, you know, that there was even a black market because in some areas they weren't able to delve into… Anyway.

I guess what I'm saying is, is that audiences are hungry. And I think many, generally, the wider audience hasn't been primed for the multitudes of voices that are out there so that they lean in towards what they know. But I think they are hungry for the stories that are of value, that they trade in. And I think it's about cracking open the wall or the door or the theatre space or the, you know, the venue spaces. And saying that these voices are here and I think when you, when you actually can get or create spaces in which people can get their butts in seats and actually see or hear or experience whatever it is that they're going to experience, they're just going to, I think devour it.

And I think the evidence is there over and over where you put people who aren't usually exposed to certain things that when you put them, especially in a live space... Whereas in film people can switch off or they can say, "I'm not there," but when you put them in a live space and they are, in a way, challenged over what they're about to experience or confronted in some way, that I think people open up to it more and more and they absorb. At the moment I'm caring for my younger cousin who is thirteen and I'm witnessing him... You know, he's living with me and we're going to the gallery... And here's someone who's, despite his mum, you know, raising him broad-mindedly, he's from a small island, and I'm taking him to things and he's just eating it up. I guess I'm going off…?

I guess what I'm trying to say is that it's the growth, this is the benefit, I think is, regardless of what type of creative you are you want an audience. And I think it's about making sure and finding a way that the audience can come if you know what I mean? And that in turn will push the art.

HG: Yeah it's not just about... The diversity of the artist on the stage, it's about the diversity of the audiences in the room. And that improves the art too. Who wants to speak to the same faces over and over again?

AS: Well that's the other thing, is that sometimes I feel like, "oh my gosh, I'm already... I'm performing to the choir." They're already won over, I can rant and scream about, you know, about all sorts. The same things… but I know this audience is going to like it anyway, regardless.

And it's a strange thing for myself I have actually, well for about two years I don't invite friends to events anymore because I know they're going to like it or they're going to tell me they like it. So my test has always been, what is an audience who doesn't know me at all going to think of my work? That's always been... Then I go, "this didn't quite work." But I don't just blame them, I blame whether or not my words were clear enough or, you know that sort of thing. So yeah, am I going off topic?

AP: No! I would agree that, I think that's... I mean if you look at the political situation we're in at the moment, in so many ways it's like a 50/50 state isn't it? Like a 50/50 world right now, where it's one side of the coin or the other. And I think you see that in mainstream television, in mainstream arts, either there's the embrace of diversity or the, "No, we want things to stay how they are."

And I think if you can create performances that are open to everyone as a practice, as an arts producer or an organiser, that are open from the beginning to as many voices as possible, that sense of it being for you, or for you alone, starts to erode. I'd like to see more collisions between one form or another. It shouldn't have to just cater to one type of audience or one type of performer.

HG: I love your guys' words, *collision, ruptures*, these are amazing things that we should be talking about and my hope is that, like, the audience listening at home is now getting like, "Oh yeah I should totally do this this thing, I should do this thing better."

So if they are, if they are thinking that, what is your… What is your, sort of, top advice for people who have realised that they really should be doing accessibility better, that they need more people to access their work, what's your top advice, what do you wish they would do?

AS: I think you could do simple things. No, there's an assumption by me saying most people for what I'm about to say... I'm saying that most people have a computer when most people don't. But if you happen to have access to the internet, I think you can often start there, it's, if you have it, it's a simple place to begin in terms of, "I would like to do an event, let me type some things into this browser and see what pops up, and then maybe I can send a comment to their Twitter or something and see if they get back."

Then sometimes I think it requires activity, you have to sometimes go out and meet and speak, and I just think if you're going to organise it takes a lot of thinking. What it is you

want and giving yourself a proper timeframe to put that on. And if you don't have the public... Let's say a friend says, "I can give you that space in two weeks," it's okay to say I think, "I can do so much in two weeks, but maybe this would be the platform that I'll invite some people to or something, and then they could see and say I want to go bigger and broader, wider, higher, you know?"... And bring those...

But I do think, again, you know, what we talked about earlier, knowing your limitations but then also having an idea is sharing your ultimate goal with others. So that people know, so they can help you get there as well.

HG: I think that point around planning and time is really important because so much of the arts is operating under so much pressure and there's so much... People feel like they constantly have to be producing, producing, making, making, more and more and more. One of the effects of that is that so much stuff happens on a shoestring. One of the effects of that is that so much happens in the first space that you find that you can get into. And then as a result of both of those things, the first thing that gets lost is accessibility and broadly accessibility. But I think particularly disability accessibility, people go for the first space they get, and it's usually up some stairs. Or people go for the first space they can get and it's too expensive so they can't have cheap tickets.

It's actually okay for your art to happen slowly. It's actually okay for you take your time and plan so that you can do a better job, it might even work out economically in the end, you don't have to constantly be new and producing and making new things. You can let things happen slowly and that way maybe more people will get to see it.

AP: I think also as an art practitioner, or an artist, being aware of diversity is important. If you are of the majority, if you are a person of the majority… I've heard complaints a few times which I find quite fascinating, where people say, well I know I'm not going to win this competition because I'm the majority voice, and just recognising that experience as well, this is what it feels like on the other side. But also like and without being *ranty*, because recognising that your space as a majority is actually... Is something that I believe when you start to embrace diversity, you have to embrace that you have less space in the room because there are more voices and that's exciting.

Seeing what comes out of that but also you can do things in your own practice. I'm no expert at any of this but I was writing a poem recently and realised I was using gendered pronouns in it and I thought, "okay, what would happen if I took the gender out of this?" And it became a totally different... It's not finished yet but it feels like a more interesting process just by considering…

Okay I don't have to be stereotyping in that way or I don't have to be streamlining in that way, and the way stories are told if you start to consider diversity and other voices in your experience in relation to them, and the potential for how voices could be, embrace that. Like, embrace the fact that you're not the only voice in the room. Embrace the fact that, that creates more interesting characters, that creates more interesting narrative streams.

It's exciting. It should be exciting, don't resent it. Everyone wants to be able to pitch to, as you were saying Harry, everyone wants to be able to go as fast as they can and produce as much as possible and that means every time there's a call for artists, you kind of check, "Do I tick that criteria? Can I be on that one, can I apply to that?" Actually slowing down and taking it at your own speed. We don't have to be industrialist artists.

HG: Yeah, that's a nice phrase. I agree with, I agree with all of this stuff but Andra was talking about both, that you can you can start by just *Googling* it or using the non-corporate, non-creepy surveying search engine of your choice. But you also do need to talk to the experts by experience, you do need to get out there and actually ask people, "What do I need to do here?"

And I agree with that but I would also add, if you are a funded organisation, if you have, if you have any public money coming in there, you must have a decent budget line around accessibility and that needs to be written from the start. And even if you don't know what you're going to do with it, you need to have written that in and decided that you're going to do something with it. And one of the top reasons for that is, if you don't know what you're doing around accessibility, pay somebody who does.

It's what we did for *Anatomy*, is we had, with Sandra actually, we hired an accessibility consultant because we knew that we didn't know enough to do it properly. And we said, "Can you spend a couple of days with us auditing what we're doing and telling us what we're doing wrong and helping us do it right?"

So pay somebody who knows what they're talking about to tell you what you're doing wrong and then actually do what they say, I think is... And you can budget for that. And I think that's one of my top bits of advice to help make that happen.

AS: And with organisations as well as artists, is being aware around your own prejudices around all those marginalised groups and these *intersectionalities* in terms of... Because when people are planning, often without being conscious of it they imagine certain things. So they imagine the, when... How can I say this? For example, they say, when they're programming, "This person may be hearing-impaired," and so they may select a white hearing-impaired male, for example. But what I'm trying to get at is, there are so many...

But people imagine certain things so people don't often think about there are so many different ways in which people might fall into different things.

HG: Yes. You only get to be one of the things, you don't get to be two of the things!

AS: Yes. That's what I'm saying. And I guess I can't quite express what I'm trying to say. But it's about being open to all of that and you just might tick three in one go. But you know what I mean, it's just being aware because I…

Again, I'm going to bring up the black-gay-male or black-queer-male space and often I feel like it's, you often see the representative of a black lesbian-identified woman who sort of fills this slight quote-unquote feminine space. But it is very hard to find the feminine quote-

unquote queer-black-male in this space. Whereas in the black-queer community you see it quite often. You know what I mean? But it's very hard.

Whereas the debate around gay circles would be, in white-gay circles, would be the masculine-male or the butch-male versus the femme-male, or "You see too many of them and they're too representative of us," So there's all this arguing. Where I feel like that argument doesn't really happen [in the black-queer community] you know because you don't really... It's about being aware of all these different things and how they, sort of fall in. And not to allow yourself to think, I'm going to fill this space now because this person fits what I expect to fit... [INAUDIBLE] Expectations of the fit and saying, "How can I even break that expectation?"

HG: You've been booked for being one token thing and then you turn up and they realise you're another thing and, "You're only supposed to be one token thing! Oh, but now you're just asking for too much I don't really know how we can do that."

I don't know, like, I have some different, different but related issues which is that I am a queer person, a gender-queer person and also autistic and those two things go together more often than people expect. But the two communities do not! They do not understand each other. Clubbing and partying is so central to LGBT history and still to LGBT socialising, it's just totally inaccessible to me. I can't go in, I can't go in those spaces. Can't go in these noisy, crowded spaces like, my head would explode, I'd have a meltdown. And there aren't many quiet queer spaces that I could go to.

AP: Oh god that's so true!

HG: I just want to sit around with some tea!

HG: But then at the other end, because there has been, historically, under-diagnosis of women and LGBT people on the autistic spectrum, like a lot of under-diagnosis, the autism community has a tendency to be very, very male and also for some similar dynamics, very, very white. And so I go to an Autism self-advocacy group, an autism mutual support group, and everyone, everyone, everyone is a white male, a straight white male, everyone. Literally. And the discussion subject is 'relationships.' And I'm like, "None of any of what you're saying is remotely relevant to me."

AP: As a physically disabled person as well like, I had a choice when I was younger... It feels like it was a choice of which trajectory I went down in terms of how far I explored my sexuality and I realised, I can't do LGBT community activities. I can't be... I can't go to gay clubs. My options closed down. I know who I am now. But I never got a chance to push any further in any other direction because there wasn't space to do that. My friends who went to gay clubs sort of like came round for breakfast the next day. And I said, "Oh great. Good. Good. How was that?"

So yeah, even in terms of that, that's such a limiting experience in terms of that sense of getting to open doors in terms of identity, in terms of opening doors in terms of creativity. I think they're not mutually exclusive, identity and *quote* creativity have to be combined. So

there has to be space for both of those things. That's really... What you're describing is very familiar, it's an interesting experience.

HG: On the intersection of all of these things and it sounds like we all feel that we've been let down by LGBT spaces at one point or another which is like, it's really heart-breaking. There's a book I highly recommend everyone called *[Fading Scars](#)* with the subtitle of *My Queer Disability History*, it's a really amazing memoir of somebody who was very involved in disability rights activism, mostly around San Francisco, and gets into like these intersections and what can happen well, as well as what can happen badly. It's a beautiful book.

Let's let go a little bit here. We've given our advice, we've talked about what other possibilities are. What are the clangers, what are the accessibility clangers that you've experienced? What are some of the most infuriating things that you'd like to rant about?

AP: I did a gig once... I used to do a set that was basically like, I passed as able-bodied and I do sort of like sexy feminine poems and then halfway through I'd say, "Oh and I also have this disability," and totally changed the trajectory and that felt like a good way of opening up conversation. I felt like I had to trick people into listening for a long time and I got booked on that basis for a gig at a festival. And I noticed that there were disabled people trying to come in and people had sort of left and gone [WHISPER NOISES] go and get *Blah-Blah*.

There were all these people in wheelchairs trying to get into the space and there was a ridge that they had to get over so they couldn't come in. And the organisers were saying, "but no, no, we'll lift you in, that's fine," In a festival! In a tent! And it was sort of like, but how, what if they just wanted to like pop their head around the door and go, "oh no, I hate poetry, I'm going to leave again."

So it was that thing of... There have been so many experiences where if you're disabled they say, oh it's accessible, but what they mean is we're going to draw so much attention to you that, you either are in or you're out. And that is not accessible, that does not feel accessible to me.

And then the same promoters like a year after that managed to get themselves a ramp sorted but then made an assumption based upon my description of my disability that because I get very fatigued easily they put me on really, really early. And when I asked to be put on later so I didn't have to like, get up in a state of paralysis and get my carer to take me to the event they sort of said, "Well no, the line-up's been set, we can't accommodate you actually performing later." So, almost from the point of view of, "Come on, we've done enough already." I said please don't book me again, after that. But that was really annoying. And also it was a paid gig and I had to start turning it down so that is always a bummer.

HG: That's a really bad story, I'm so sorry. I think it highlights a few of the things that we've touched on. Both the like, not making assumptions and actually asking instead of assuming, and also something we haven't talked about as much which is that accessibility isn't just about putting a stop-gap in there, it's about, it's about enabling autonomy and

enabling people who have different access needs to make their own decisions to do what they want to do like anybody else.

AS: Do you find that you have to turn down gigs often?

AP: I have a situation where, because I sometimes pass as able-bodied I get asked to do things and have to be the one who raises... Actually is the station nearby accessible? Is the venue accessible? And yes I do, I do sometimes find myself turning down performances just from the sake of, no that's not physically manageable or, financially I wouldn't be able to get there. And it's not that I want to be a millionaire through being a poet, but if you spend more money getting to a venue than you can afford that week that, that makes it an impossible feat. And also in terms of just attending things like open-mics and stuff, what I find in the arts world is you have to be physically present a lot. And if your body can't be it's so easy to get just forgotten and people to... It's the chats in pubs of, "Oh, what are you doing?" Why are all the conversations in pubs? That's also a problematic situation.

AS: That's something that, when I first came here was, the networking is done, especially in the poetry world, around the pub. Around the pub and the open-mic space, especially the open-mic space.

AP: Yeah.

AS: So therefore there are a lot of issues. Like, I have issues around, I can't enter often crowded spaces. I feel awkward so I ask friends to meet me you know. And if I don't have that it's just very difficult. Plus, I don't drink, so there's all these sort of things around the pub thing that make it a very difficult space.

And I know that in 10 years what I was able to achieve, in Bermuda where I'm from compared to here, even though Bermuda's small, I know that, but still it's been very slow because I know of where that focus lays and if you can't access that in itself then that makes it really difficult.

AP: It can be really hurtful as well because you have people that you form friendships with and you suddenly realise if you say, "no I can't drink for health reasons," or, "no I can't come to that event for health reasons," or you don't always want to explain why, sometimes you just can't be there. You sort of get forgotten and that feeling of, every time my body crashes I feel like I'm rebuilding not only my physical self but my artistic self from the very ground.

And you sort of turn up at an event and people fail to recognise you. And you think but a few years ago I was your resident poet or, you know like, I was somebody who, or... Even I just thought we were friends and friendships are so much, in the art world, sometimes about who's doing what. Finding who's really listening and who really wants to hear from you or keep turning up or keep being there for you. Like that's a different thing to who you are *schmoozling* with and that can be a very... can leave a sort of foul taste in your mouth I think, when you realise, "Oh, okay I'm no longer relevant because I haven't been here."

HG: It's really painful, I think this overlap between your social world and your professional world, which is a huge part of the arts, right? In that the social world and the professional world are often the same thing. And as you've both been saying like, the networking, the professional relationships are built in these casual social situations. That there are also sort of obstacles to entry to you.

I have my own obstacles to entry to those things and I almost never go to the post-gig chat. Because the way I think about it, if any networking event of any post-gig socialisation is that, that is going to be the hardest job that I have to do that day. Getting on stage and performing? No problem. Totally happy with that, often gives me more energy, I mean, obviously it works so it takes some effort.

Going to any kind of social or networking event is the biggest drain of energy and I have to think about going to it, it's a very difficult job that I have to do. And so I go to like one of them, you know I might go to one a month. I might save up the energy to stay after the gig once a month. Otherwise I'm like, literally on my bike and away home to sleep. But it's so much better.

And without, honestly without social media I would not have an arts career because instead of all of that networking which requires a social facility and an ability to be in crowded noisy spaces that I simply don't have, I wouldn't have been able to build a reputation or an interest in my work, but I'm good at Twitter so that helped, you know? And that kind of formed a part-way substitute. But I still feel what you're feeling which is this horrible sort of social death that sometimes because you're not present in a space where everyone else is socialising, because I'm like in bed at nine, that I don't get to have friends in my world.

AP: Yeah, and those chats develop creative avenues but they also develop creative ideas. The bit where you go hey let's do, let's do a thing with this and then you follow it up later on. If you're not there for that initial momentum chat... It goes back to that thing of okay, we've had this conversation, hey let's do a thing with this. Now, how are we going to bring in as many voices as possible? If someone's not been in that conversation.

AP: I used to have a friend who would just email me the chats that had happened afterwards and that was a really nice thing. I liked it, I thought it was, you know, if you can't be there you still felt missed or is not like I need to be in every room ever. But it is nice to know what's going on out there. Yeah. Again, so social media's been really important.

HG: I've started putting in a thing on... You know you get the form when you've been booked and it says do you have any particular access needs. And half the time they ignore it. But I've started... No they do! I've started writing in, "Is there a networking event? Is there a social event that's meant to be part of this whole thing? Am I supposed to benefit from this networking event? If there is, can I have a *buddy* please, for the first half-hour? Can somebody introduce me to people for the first half-hour? Can somebody start conversations for me?" And it's not happened yet. But I've asked quite lot of times.

AP: That's such a good idea!

HG: It's just not happened yet, once or twice somebody has like half-heartedly introduced me to their friend and then got away. But I'm like I'm trying to work on it but it's not happening yet.

AS: I remember what I was really impressed with *Bar Wotever* . I had mentioned that I don't come as often because it's the entering of the club that really, sort of, terrifies me a bit. And I was impressed with, "Oh, that's no problem. We'll have someone meet you at the *tube* and introduce you and walk in with you. You can sit with them all night."

I didn't take them up on it, but I was really impressed with that the offer was there and was quick. It wasn't like, "Oh, what could we do? Oh I know!" It was sort of like we've come across this before, don't worry, we'll get someone out there.

AP: That's exactly what *Sisters Uncut* did as well. When I was saying I am anxious about being in my wheelchair for the first time they came and met me and brought me. And so it wasn't even just a case of, ah we have access, it's like we have access and we're going to check that you're okay. And that was a really important thing.

Relatedly, when you have applications online, I think that's something that happens a lot is the deadlines are very short. Like hey we've got a thing again, going back to that thing of produce it fast we've got a deadline… And if you have a physical limitation you need to sort of schedule in your day. So I find that I miss a lot of really important applications. I put them all in my *Google calendar* and set like a week alarm but if I can't type that week or if there's, there's a problem, those deadlines are often… if you've given me two weeks, there's no way in hell that's going to happen, ever.

So, if you're going to meet those diversity criteria why not have, "This is our main deadline, but if you have a reason for not meeting that, please get in touch." If they were to say that and say okay, we might possibly flex in your circumstances by a couple of days, that kind of thing would enable the initial conversation of, "Hey do you want to take part in this thing?" to reach out to a wider community.

That kind of went off topic but that would be really, that would be a really helpful way of increasing your diversity and range of voices criteria in it, from my experience anyway.

HG: I think I want to finish up on this idea of *access everywhere* which is a slogan that I really like. This idea that what we should be aiming for is access everywhere, that there shouldn't be anywhere that anything happens that isn't accessible across all of these lines that we've been talking around. I think my question to you then is, as a kind of wrap-up, what is your vision for access everywhere? How would you like to see the arts transformed on that principle?

AP: I'd like to see a world where access everywhere means that you're not only being booked when it's about your pigeonhole. I would like to see interesting genres booking interesting people. That would be really exciting if it weren't just a case of like, hey, this is a specific thing catered to you and your needs. It just... You have needs and also you're good at this thing. That would be nice.

HG: That's a beautiful vision.

AS: I think, jumping off from that is that representation, again I've put myself back in the seat of the audience. I would like to think that any given night, any person of any manifestation can know where to look and say, "I'm going to see myself somewhere. I'm going to see myself in the art and my story or a story similar to mine will be told." Or that, you know, I met *so-and-so* the other day and I can go and see something that will give me some insight into *so-and-so's* life, you know, that they're represented somewhere.

So you can see yourself. And the more that you see yourself if you're a creative, again, then you're more inspired to create your story. And then you become one of the, hopefully many that already exist and will exist, that are telling our stories back.

Because I think eventually it's like if you have a bowl and you put all... And it starts spilling out. Let's say, outside is the BBC or whatever it is, or some theatre space, people, I do think people will be forced to hear. There's only so much you keep the voices outside the door. And then they get louder, then they end up breaking through. Yeah. We need to see, then you have more voices, then eventually people will be forced to hear them. Or people will be going, "Why don't I hear about that?" And there'll be asking, "Why aren't we hearing about that?" And they'll be demanding those voices as well.

AP: Yeah, seeing yourself and at the moments where you don't see yourself being changed and transformed by the people you are seeing as well.

AS: Yes.

AP: So, it's like that thing if you only see like white skinny woman in crop tops. You feel ashamed for not being that. The moment you see someone, a *fat* person on TV doing something you admire, you stop worrying about, "Oh god am I the right size?" Because you go well, there are so many ways to be. The more ways to be that there are in the world the better we'll all be producing other things.

HG: You know what? I'm going to leave it on that beautiful, beautiful sentence. That is such a wonderful last sentence!

There are so many more things we could talk about and obviously we're all just talking from our own positions and in no way have we covered every intersection thoroughly. But thank you both so much for that conversation. I've had a lovely time, it feels quite healing this morning. So thank you Andra Simons and Abi Palmer. This has been wonderful, I was Harry Giles and I'll hand you back to Lunar Poetry.

End of transcript.