Screening Room no. 10 - All of a Sudden I Began to Melt
A conversation between Ruth Waters and residency 11:11 facilitators Alex Bell and Giulia Shah

Giulia 00:02
Hi Ruth, it's really nice to have you. You're showing your film *All of a Sudden I Began to Melt* in the screening room from the 22nd of may, for a month. Alex and I saw it a couple of years ago in the exhibition at *Kingsgate Project Space*, I think where you had a residency at the time. And yeah, I really loved it. It's really exciting to actually talk to you about the film.

Ruth 00:29
Hi, guys. Nice to see you. I can see you, no one else can see you.

Giulia 00:36
Yeah, maybe we could just start very kind of broadly. And you can introduce yourself a little bit and tell a bit about your practice. And this film in specific.

Ruth 00:48
Yeah, so my name is Ruth, and I am an artist, I work mostly in film and video installation. I think the main kind of like topics in my work, is there's always an element of anxiety, the films have always in some way to do with anxiety. And most recently, I'm kind of interested in status anxiety, and how status affects our interpersonal relationships. I think one good way to kind of summarise what I'm interested in at the moment is, I've got this poster by an artist called *Scott King*. And it's like a picture of a sunset. And on the front of it, it just says success can be overcome. And I just really like this idea that success is a thing that we need to kind of... reframing successes and negative. And it's like a disease that we're all infected with. And we need to try and kind of overcome it. So that's what I'm interested in looking at at the moment.

Giulia 01:53
That's also seems very much apparent in the film that was showing. I guess, because I met you a few years after I had seen the film. For some reason, I had the kind of feeling it might have been based on some personal experiences. And I was curious to know what your relationship specifically to the luxury service industry is. And if there is some like biographical element or personal experience to the film.

Ruth 02:20
Yeah, I mean, I think all my films start from some sort of personal experience, and then kind of take off in a different direction. So I have worked a lot in the service industry, not really the luxury service industry, but I spent like 10 years working in bars, and restaurants, cinemas, all that sort of stuff. And so that's been a big interest. And like this idea that in those spaces, you're always having to perform in some way and kind of like smile and be nice to people. And those experiences and those interactions are often not genuine, like sometimes you have amazing genuine experiences with people, but other times, you're forced to kind of show a certain emotion. And I think that in the film... a masseuse is like an extreme conclusion of that, like, they're in this very intimate situation. And the masseuse has to make the customer feel very comfortable in this sort of vulnerable situation. And their performance is so integral to what they do, like they have to change the way they talk and like, you know, make the room smell nice and it's like a big stage that they're setting to try and make this other person feel as comfortable as possible. And I just also like playing with the idea that that is all happening, but then as soon as the massage begins, the customer can't actually see the face of the masseuse. So it's like when you're working behind a bar you're always kind of on show and this is while you're interacting with customers, but in this situation she's very much still interacting with the customer but can also kind of reveal her real face and what she's thinking above the table so there's this kind of like above and below the table of what you can see. I think it's funny. I know you guys work in restaurants and stuff as well. So you know what I'm talking about.

Giulia 04:23
Yes, really, this element of performativity is really interesting. I always feel like I was performing or am performing in that sort of setting and the kind of above and below the table... I think because I always worked like front of house, I guess you as well Alex. And you as well Ruth? I was always jealous of the people that are in the kitchen or something where you can have that performativity where you can also like I don't know hide back in the kitchen and also how people behave in the kitchen is completely different to right? Like this backstage and front stage and yeah, all these etiquettes and like different behaviours, not just with clients, but also with even your colleagues and... yeah, kind of social norms and hierarchies are so "weird" in that industry.

Ruth 05:11

Yeah, it's so weird. And also like, yeah, like you say, there's like a backstage kind of environment where you go into a kitchen or whatever. And you can do and say exactly what you want and talk about people however you want and reveal what you're really thinking about certain situations. And I think in the film, that idea is that the masseuse is kind of having a little rebellion, and that slowly reveals itself, like, you're not really aware of that at the beginning, you think it's just a normal massage, normal situation. And then gradually, as the film goes on, you're aware of her true emotions and feelings in the situation and also that she's actually trying to do small actions that rebel against having to perform in that certain way.

Alex 06:03
Well, I guess this kind of leads us on to the Wotsits, which is quite a prominent feature of the film. And the Wotsits being the kind of protagonist in the film. And I guess it would be good if you could just tell us a little bit about the inspiration or the idea behind the Wotsit.

Ruth 06:21
So the Wotsit appears as this thing which is meant to puncture the environment that the masseuse is trying to create or more that that customer is buying into. The customer is buying into paying to be in this perfect little bubble in which they're in this luxury amazing environment and nothing from the outside is getting in and then the Wotsit is meant to kind of pierce through that. Kind of like the grit in the Vaseline. Like it's meant to rub up against what she's imagining her experience to be. So yeah, that was kind of the idea behind the Wotsit. Also Wotsits are kind of... Often people see them as a bit repulsive. Like, I love Wotsits, but like they can be seen as quite a repulsive thing. It gets like stuck on your fingers and is really gross and disgusting. I think I've always been fascinated with Wotsits.

There's this Chuck Palahniuk (Snuff) book, and in the beginning of it, he talks about crisps. I'm not going to go into what the books about because it's a complicated story. But anyways, this begins with "one dude stood all afternoon at the buffet wearing his boxers licking the orange dust of barbecue potato chips. Next to him a dude was scooping into the onion dip and licking the dip, dip off the chip. The same soggy chip scoop after scoop. Dudes have a million ways of peeing on what they claim is just their own." But yeah, just this kind of like idea of eating crisps and crisps kind of being gross and visceral and disgusting, but also tasty and amazing and the best thing ever so yeah.

Alex 08:12

Yeah, I like that. It kind of made me think of some words like contamination residue in this kind of like stain. You know, you can even after you kind of lick it all up. It's still there. This smell is still there, but also it like stains your fingers. I'm very into Wotsits too.

Ruth 08:32
Yeah, you get these orange sticky fingers and like, the idea of the client like lying there and imagining kind of like sticky orange Wotsit dust fingers massaging her Is like the least relaxing thing ever. But I also just love the idea that the Wotsit is kind of like coming in and fucking with her. It's fucking with her head and everything that all these kind of preconceived ideas that she has of like, eating Wotsits or people who eat Wotsits it's, it's like, yeah, well, this Wotsits is gonna come in and ruin your expensive massage, so...

Giulia 09:12
It's also like this collective memory of what it smells like because when I saw the film and saw the Wotsit, especially when it's placed in this water plate with lilies–not sure how to describe it–I can actually smell it, you know, it's such a strong smell that is always in my memory, especially as a kid they were like, my favourite my favourite crisps.

Alex 09:36
Also the sound the sound is excellent.

Giulia Shah 09:39
Yeah, and they kind of melt. I really fancy some Wotists now.

Alex 09:42
Also the sound in the films really interesting as well. This like chomping the whole environment is this kind of sensory experiences and sound becomes really important and the soundtrack kind of transports you into this space of wellness. And I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about that as well. And the importance of that in the film

Ruth 10:07
Yeah, so I use sound and kind of Foley. So like recorded sound effects a lot in all of my films. And this is the first time actually that I've worked with other people on my projects. Normally, I'm doing everything myself, but I actually had some funding this time to work with other people. So, yeah, I got to geek out with Louis he did the sound effects by listening to hundreds of versions of different massage

sounds. And I just think sounds so important, because it can completely transport you to another place. So like in the film, the sounds are doing multiple things at once. So the sound of the massage, like a massage is happening and that's like a relaxing thing but the actual audio of the massage is really icky and disgusting. So it's kind of playing again with this idea that you're in a luxury, amazing place but the reality of it is that the audio and the sound of that happening is actually quite repulsive as well. So yeah, playing with those two things together. But yeah, sound is really important to, for me to think about the audio and that could say it's getting to work with Louis, on those sounds was like really exciting, because I've got someone else to be geeky about them with. And then Luke as well, also made the spa music, which was like another whole thing. So the music as it goes on progresses from this like nice, soft, gentle spa music, and then towards the end gets more kind of like loud and intense. So that was also fun, being able to kind of just send Luke like 20 different spa sounds like "these are the greatest spa sounds. Love these ones. This one's great. That's amazing". And then really kind of seeing in the studio together and playing around with like, how icky to make it or how kind of like, intense to make it in different moments. So that was yeah, it was really fun.

Giulia Shah 12:16
That was actually one of the questions I had, because I feel like most of your films or works that I've seen are quite like elaborate productions. And I'm just interested in how you work with other people within those productions. But because it's interesting that you say that this was like one of the first opportunities, you had to actually, like, work with specialists on certain parts of the film, maybe you can say a little bit about how that was different to how you were working before and how you feel about working with other people within, like your own work, I guess.

Ruth 12:52
So I think before, I've worked on things, I've had help from friends, so like my boyfriend, also a filmmaker and works in documentaries so if I've been filming things, you know, he gets roped along to help out. And it's more been, I mean, you know, mainly kind of like finances permitting you do what you can with what you can. And yeah, this is the first time that I've had a bit of budget to kind of really work with people who are really good at what they do and that for me, it's just, I don't know... I just way prefer working with lots of people than working on my own. I'm not like someone who enjoys sitting in a room on their own kind of playing around and coming up with different things, or I'm not an artist in that sense at all. And even on the script in this project, at the beginning, when I was

working with Luke and Mateo, who run *Foreign Body Productions* to help on the film, it was just they were coming on to produce a film but in the end, they were helping with the script. And it was all like a proper collaborative project. And I just really, really enjoyed that. I think the art world is quite weird, especially.... I don't know, it's a weird space where if you go to a show, there's like one name on the show. It's not like a list of different people that's like, oh, it's all these people who are involved. So yeah, it's quite different like that. I mean, I think with artist films, you can have credits and stuff so that's great, because people get credit for what they're doing. But often you'll go to something, and even the installation and everything that's a whole big job that someone's doing that their name isn't like on the door, you know. In traditional film, like everyone knows the director, the producer, the writer, it's much more credited.

Giulia Shah 14:50
I guess you also learn a lot along the way working with other people on a production like that, or any production but somehow it also maybe allows for more kind of experimentation or things to happen that you didn't even imagine were possible, I guess. Especially working with people that you're seeing that are really good at what they do. And like also specialist in like a certain area.

Ruth 15:17
Yeah, totally. And yeah, like Matty who I worked with on the set, like she designed the set, just like absolute genius. And it was just like, it was so fun to work with her because I have no idea how to build a set. Like, it's not something I've ever done before. But like, we could really collaborate on that together. And she was able to, you know, source loads of stuff being in that world of set design and everything, she knew how to get things up and running and help make my idea into like, a real thing. So definitely, I mean, I've always worked with others.. with actors, as well. So I'd say that's the one thing where I've paid other people to work on my productions before. And I like working with actors, because they bring a whole new thing to everything as well. I often set out with an idea of how I want to direct someone, and then they'll do something and I'm like, oh, no, that that's not right. And then when it comes to editing it, I'm like, "Oh my God, that's exactly what I needed" the thing, which I didn't think I need it at all.

Alex 16:13
When we both saw the film, at *Kingsgate Project Space*, it wasn't just like a film, it was kind of in this set. So kind of like some of the furniture the kind of like the smell, I remember there being like an air diffuser smell puffy thing, the lighting, so it was kind of like you're bringing elements of the film into the space to create this

kind of experience to then watch the film. And I was interested to get your thoughts on the experience of watching the film and that setting and watching the film separately, and kind of if you have a kind of personal preference to how the film's viewed, because I think seeing it in different ways must be kind of interesting for you.

Ruth 17:21
Yeah, I mean, it's really fun as an artist, kind of, unlike a filmmaker, as an artist, you get to create the environment that people actually watch your film in as well. And again, for the installation I worked with Matty on on the whole installation. And I don't know, it adds a different element to watching the film for sure. So like, a friend of mine watched the film in the installation and said... So there's a bowl, for people who haven't seen the installation, there's a bowl in front of the screen, which is the same as as the flower bowl that's underneath the massage table. And it has the Wotsit inside of it. And he said he sat down to watch the film and at the beginning, you didn't notice that the Wotsit was inside so he was like "did the Wotsit appear halfway through? Did it come up through the floor? Like how did the Wotsit get there?" And I was like, oh, it's always there, you just didn't see it in the first instance. So I think it's funny how people come into that space of like, it looks very much like a spa environment but again, they notice these Wotsits kind of in different places. So yeah, there's some Wotsits and there's some other flowers and the Wotsits are kind of entangled with the roots and the flowers and stuff.

Giulia 18:44
I think that the first ever work I saw of yours, I think was your graduation work, which was more kind of an experience, I guess, performance experience, space. But after that I'm more aware of like your video work and feel like you've become more of like a filmmaker, maybe a little bit of a boring question but how do you view the importance of film in your work? Do you consider yourself more of a filmmaker these days? Or do you find that a little bit like putting you in a box?

Ruth 19:21
Yes, it is an interesting question because I think before at that point, like for my degree show, I knew I had this enclosed space, that was my space, and I could do what I want with it, and people would enter that I could control everything about it. Whereas then kind of on leaving university, I was then in a lot of group shows and different spaces and you can't really have that sort of experiential performance space in a group show. It's like it's much more complicated. And also for applying for things it's a lot easier just to send a video file for someone to

look at then to try and explain a whole sort of installation. So like, practically, that's how I started moving more into film. But more recently, like working on this project, I've just much, much more enjoyed working in that sort of process. Working with other people and it being a collaborative thing. And film is much more like that. Also, like, I'm a sucker for a narrative. And the art world doesn't like narrative. So maybe I'm a filmmaker these days.

Giulia 20:33
Yeah, but it makes sense how you talk about working with other people and how you work generally and like to produce things in collaboration with others. And film is a very kind of relevant medium in that. But it is also interesting how you speak about moving away, like moving towards film after you graduate, I see that a lot where, you know, people graduate, they don't have the space anymore, you have to try to find a form or medium that is the most practical way to kind of manifest your ideas in. But I feel like with you, it's been like a progression, I guess, in a way of your work and what you want your work to be and not just like a solution to a problem.

Ruth 21:14
Yeah, no, also, unlike this is the first time I've entered a film that I've made into like film festivals as well. So it's like entering a slightly different world. But I'm like, I'm very happy with that. I'm not kind of like, oh, no, I'm exiting the art world. I feel like I can exist in both. But yeah, it's, it's interesting to crossover between the two.

Giulia 21:41
Yeah, and also thinking about like, the hierarchies between those two, and maybe also disrupting that a little bit. So I guess it's interesting also, especially when you talk about success and anxiety, like that fits very much, within also the kind of world, "creative" world that you then fit in or shift between. You're quite funny as a person. And you make quite funny work as well. And humour seems to be of importance to you, talking about things. And I guess it fits in with how you speak about anxiety and maybe it's like a tool to be able to talk about things that are hard to talk about? But yeah, I'm interested to know how you use humour and the importance of that.

Ruth 22:29
I don't know.. I've always made work with humour, like you say, but like this time, I entered this film into festival, so it's in London Short Film Festival and they put your film into like different categories. And it was in the like, comedy section. And I was shitting. Myself, I was just like, "Oh my God, no" I don't like... because in

the art world, you can make something and people aren't expecting it to be funny. So they're more open to kind of like having laughing because they're more surprised and like, "oh my god, that was actually a little bit funny". Whereas, if you're have something on the door, it says, this is going to be funny "I was like, no one's gonna laugh, like, no one is gonna laugh" but within like, the first few minutes, like everyone in the room was laughing and I was like "ah, that's amazing" like, I didn't expect it at all. But yeah, I don't know. It's hard to follow something when someone says you're funny because then you have to think you try and be funny. And that's, it's, it's not it's not going to happen.

Giulia 23:33
But do you think you use humour? Like in a certain way? Do you use it as a tool? Or is it just something that comes naturally?

Ruth 23:42
I think humour… in the darkest of times, things are often the most funny. Like when things are really shi it's often the time when things are actually hilarious and I know that that some people don't think like that, but I think dark humour is the funniest. I just think anything dark and funny at the same time helps you look at really shit things in a different way and kind of get through really shit things or kind of make you question what it is that is making you feel shit. I guess. That makes any sense whatsoever.

Alex 24:22
It does a lot. I think you've made a few films with foods that have eyes on them. Food that talks to you is hilarious. It's very funny. And I like the idea of lots of different foods starting to talk to you to like kind of melt up all the voices in your head. Humour seems like a big thread, narrative but also, food seems to be another thread that's kind of running through your work. I was wondering, yeah, at what point did food start coming into the work you started making?

Ruth 25:07
Yeah, that's an interesting question. Because it took me into making like, two films to do with food, and then two films to do with food with food with eyes on them for me to realise that I'd made two films with food. Like someone had to say that to me "Oh, yeah, that film had food with eyes on them as well" but yeah, the, I don't know, food's interesting, because it's filled with a lot of politics around food. And also, food makes you feel amazing. And I love food, and I love eating. But it's also filled with a lot of shame and guilt sometimes as well. So again, it's these two things within one item, which I think is an interesting contradiction. But

then also, I guess this is an example I was watching on the BBC, on YouTube, they have this BBC archives YouTube channel, which has, like old archive footage from BBC News, or just BBC TV programmes. And on the TV programme, it's like people from the north and people from the South. And they went to the south and asked people what they thought about people from the north and vice versa. Which is, like, ridiculous, but also, it's kind of funny. So they interviewed this woman who was from the south but had lived up North before. They had to move away from the north, because they cooked everything in one pot. She was like "I was just disgusted. They put everything in one pot rather than cooking, like the vegetables and the meat and things separately" which I don't know where I'm going with that story. But basically, there's a lot of things tied up in food. And I find it really interesting.

Giulia 25:09
Yeah, definitely! Maybe it's nice to hear a bit about what you've got going on at the moment. If you're working on anything, or what's next, or anything you'd like to share?

Ruth 27:09
Yeah, so am I working on anything? I'm working on work and making money at the moment. So I've been doing that a lot. But then also writing a script for something which has kind of turned into like a much longer thing. So it's more of a feature length thing rather than a short thing. So then I'm just working on trying to get some money for that, which, I mean, it's probably going to be impossible, but hopefully..

Giulia 27:34
Really exciting! A film about talking food!

Ruth 27:38
Yeah, let's not jump the gun. Hopefully, someone gives me some money.

Giulia 27:42
Yay. Okay, everyone listening, give Ruth some money for her feature film. She will promise there will some food with eyes in it

Ruth 27:54
Shit, there's no food with eyes in it. I'm gonna have to write some in.

Giulia 28:02

That's great. Well, thanks so much. It was really nice chatting about the film. *All of a Sudden I began to Melt* and it will be screening in the screening room, 22nd of May till the 21st of June.

Ruth 28:18
All right. Thanks, guys.