Screening Room No. 12: *Report to an Academy*
A conversation with Sarah Browne and guest curator Iarlaith Ni Fheorais

Iarlaith 00:06
Hi, everyone. Thanks for joining us. I am Iarlaith. I'm a white woman with silver glasses, and I have long brown curly hair tied up. And I'm wearing a white, and black pinstripe shirt. Sarah....

Sarah 00:24
Hi, everyone. I'm Sarah. I'm also a white woman with brown hair cut into a blunt fringe.

Iarlaith 00:32
Thank you for joining us for a conversation between Sarah and I, in response to Sarah's film "Report to an Academy". There will be a transcript available of todays conversation on the webpage. The film Report to Academy unfortunately, is not captioned, but there's also a transcript available for you on the webpage. So with that little housekeeping access statement over: Thank you so much Sarah, for sharing this film with us. It must be really nice to revisit a slightly older film. And it speaks so much to your practice overall. But let's dig down a little bit into the themes in the content and how the film functions, what it responds to. So Report to an Academy is a film based on the Kafka story of the same title. Where in this version an optimist speaks of its motivation to evade the neoliberal University, in the original it's a monkey that speaks to an academy. Can you speak to the impetus behind this work and the context you made it in?

Sarah 01:46
Sure. So this work was commissioned by a curatorial duo called Manual Labours, Jenny Richards, and Sophie Hope, based in the UK, and Manual Labours is really focused on the effects of work on the body in the broadest sense. And in this second strand of commissions, they were particularly asking the artists to look at ideas of complaint, on the complaining body

and how that manifests in the workplace now. So rather than invent a kind of a scenario, or make something fictional, I really I suppose used the commission as a way of working through things that were happening in my workplace at the time. So I was working as a university lecturer, there was a lot of student protests around the work and learning conditions that were happening. So the institution isn't named in the piece, because actually the struggle was very accessible to many people who encounter the work. But it developed from thinking around I suppose the ineffectiveness of language at a certain point in articulating a problem or kind of being met with other kinds of neoliberal language... so the sense itself doesn't work or something. And I was in these meetings that were being described by my colleagues, often as Kafkaesque, as kind of a joke. And the film, I suppose, really examines what, are the qualities of living in a Kafkaesque kind of situation. Some of the research around it was thinking actually, really specifically around the space of the mouth and the tongue and making casts of the mouth of things that couldn't be said, or complaints.. kind of making something material from this space. And the octopus joined that somehow as reversing back this Kafka story. So in the original, like you say, it's an ape that learns to speak in order to beg for mercy basically from the Academy. And this film (Report to an Academy) is an essay that's delivered by this octopus, who's surrendered speech in order to become completely bodily. And in terms of the context, it's been quite an interesting film in the showing of it... I've often organised workshops, when I show up with the University, where the work is being exhibited or screened and we'll kind of repeat some of the research exercises that were involved in the making of it, like the making these mouth casts or revisiting some of the research material.

larlaith 04:41
Thanks, Sarah. And I think the relationship between kind of the mouth, tongue and speech and rights and humanhood, is something we'll return to later, but as a vehicle towards language, the dynamic between language and power is a crucial concern in the work. And you mentioned how you don't speak about specifics about what the institution was or what the politics were at that moment. But it certainly feels deeply familiar to anyone

who would have worked in a neoliberal institution, particularly in the arts over the past 10-15 years through multiple crises, be that austerity or Covid, and thinking how I've certainly been in those meetings, and been thinking about how language in the neoliberal institution is used to confuse or evade legibility, or used to gain more power or control, and it becomes this vehicle to be worked around. And so importantly, the work looks at how we might turn those tactics back on the institution. How did you approach this relationship to language in the work?

Sarah 05:57
I guess some of it is around collecting the language that was around me, like you're saying, because there are these points in the work where there's the phrases of the institution are listed, doing more with less, and yeah, all these kinds of very ambiguous phrases. Yeah, we were speaking before, around the relationship between language and knowledge as well. And that translation of something you know in your body, with something you're being told is Language, and sometimes there's quite a gap there or a friction. And equally, sometimes it's necessary to find language as a way of dealing with power or confronting power. So we had talked about Miranda Fricker's book that I was reading at the time, but it would have come out earlier, called "Epistemic Injustice". And in this, she talks through kind of two different models, two different feminists knowledge models, really, of how all kinds of injustice that are perpetrated against people as knowers a subjective of knowledge. And one of those is the one I guess we're quite familiar with is testimonial injustice, which relates to people not being believed or not being heard on their terms, or this very difficult experience to puncture. But then there's also hermeneutical injustice, and that's maybe more relevant to language; the problem of interpretation. And it's the idea that if you have language for a certain experience, then you can deal with mechanisms of power differently. So the kind of classical example is, until the 1970s there was no phrase legally for sexual harassment. And all these things that were not at the level of rape, that kind of very explicit breaking of a boundary of bodily autonomy, but finding a phrase that kind of gathered up and collected all of these experiences that people had in their bodies,

but couldn't bring into language necessarily. There is, I suppose, a necessity sometimes to use language as one of the masters tools, I guess.

larlaith 08:29
It's interesting you bring that up, because to think about language and rights or the power of knowledge, and how that can be used against a subject, but also used by a subject as a means of accessing justice. And thinking in the context of disability and thinking about capacity tests, and thinking about a disabled person who has the capacity to speak is seen as more of a person who has more of those rights as an adult. But it is a disabled person who can't speak for whatever reason, has less access to those rights. So it's really interesting to think about when you're casting these mouths, and thinking about language, and thinking about knowledge, and what knowledge looks like, and how we conceptualise knowledge, and how that's transferred, really impacts the subject and the body and what rights that that subject has, and how that subject can relate to others. And it kind of unpacks how someone in an institution is treated or is understood by the institution itself. And it brings me back to this situation of an institution that I worked in where they would use.. You'd have meetings about how... it was currently being sued and there was freedom of information requests coming in regularly. So they would tell us to speak about this person through only surname or only abbreviations. And this was directly around kind of questions of sexual harassment. So how these questions of language and naming and rights, and how the body is tied up in that is interesting and is also a key concern in your work... How the institution shapes the body, or how the body is forced to evade it. So when we think about the octopus is something that has no joints has no bones, can slip into incredibly small cracks, we also might think about the rat or the mouse in that context is something that has gained a kind of a fear amongst humans or like a grotesque kind of status, but is something that can invade, blocks and can move around. And this is a concerns within your practice, of the body and institution, do you mind speaking about your ongoing interest in the institution and the body, particularly in the Irish context? You've done quite a lot of work, of course, you've curated TULCA....

Sarah 11:13
Yeah, it's kind of interesting that it happened, really, without me noticing, which maybe speaks to how institutions operate in public life in Ireland historically, that they're there in the landscape, you know, affecting the psyche somehow, or what is possible for you as a person with a public life. So in a way, I'm not sure where it begins or ends, especially once you notice that that is something that's in your work. I wouldn't have thought of myself as somebody making that kind of work previously.

Iarlaith 11:49
But you will be showing one work, in particular in this year's TULCA Festival, which I'm curating, which is "Echo's Bones", opening in November. So in this film, you work with a group of young autistic people, in response to Beckett's unpublished short story of the same name. And it's based in the landscape around Portrane Hospital in North County, Dublin, which was a mental health institution hospital, in the north of Dublin. TULCA itself deals these legacies or the effect of these institutions on landscape and communities.. so the term ‘to go to Ballinsaloe’ in the west of Ireland means to get a mental health diagnosis, and the stigma attached to that, and Portrane has a similar kind of weight in Dublin, or North County, Dublin. And we've been talking a lot about language, but I suppose there's also feelings there and there's something felt emotionally at an affective level. So I was wondering, how did you feel about making work in this landscape and making work about this in a restorative way through a neurodiverse lens?

Sarah 13:05
Could you say something more about the restorative idea?

Iarlaith 13:10
I've been interested in that, when we make work– Just for everyone else out there that I also make work about the kind of legacies and institutions of disability in Ireland and elsewhere – and thinking about what is the purpose of making this kind of work, of bringing this history back, or dealing with these themes of thinking about disability and institutionalisation? I've never been institutionalised, but I am a disabled person from Ireland. So those

stigmas and those legacies of mass institutionalisation... so Ireland institutionalised more of its people than enter the country in the mid 20th century, most of those living in mental health institutions.. So there's a violent legacy here and when I think about ‘restorative’, it’s like how do we re- approach these places in a fashion that looks towards the future, that looks towards disability justice, that thinks about disabled people today, that thinks about how we may remember in a way that centres justice, or think about basically making sure that we centre the voices of disabled people today, and their own feelings and opinions and thoughts on these places. Does that answer your question?

Sarah 14:26
Yeah, I think it's a really interesting idea to ventilate more, you know this kind of restorative or reparative idea. So yeah, I just wanted hear you speak about a little bit I guess. I should mention, like returning a little bit to the previous question, this piece of work that I worked with Jesse Jones on over a couple of years called In The Shadow of the State. And that was quite an intensive process of working with... working around what we kind of identified as like the touch of the law. Yeah particularly for women. And resulted in a series of performances from a lot of academic research. But also these workshops that we held with women in the different places we were working. And we really explored this question of the touch of the law, and what does the touch of the law feel like, and how to touch the law back, which again is I suppose this space between the body and language, but trying to find modes of action or responsiveness to the law as an instrument of the state that would often be extended into people's lives through institutions, but to think about that really physically and sensorily, rather than through language, and with a large collective process of research. And I had mentioned to you before this, in one of these workshops, the participants were from many different fields of expertise, bringing their personal expertise and their professional expertise on law or activism, including the amazing Kate Butler, who’s a barrister and a DJ. And Kate also does a lot of work with Inclusion Ireland, an organisation for people with intellectual disabilities, and she had brought somebody through that agency to participate in the workshop. And since then, which was like

2015/2016, around the time I was making the octopus film as well, I just was actually really struck by, you know, how my practice exists in largely in a discourse of ‘social engagement’, you know in those kinds of woolly terms. But I had not knowingly worked with people with intellectual disabilities at anytime, as part of those social engagement processes. So I had been thinking about how to look at some of those assumptions around social engagement, or who has the right to a public life in our practice, as part of making the work. So that was something that I brought "Echo's Bones". The work with this group of autistic young people. I was just thinking about who was usually invited to participate in processes of social engagement in the arts. And what if you really desire a public life, or you really desire a public expression for your creativity, but your chosen means of social engagement is perhaps not like sitting around a table with a load of people talking in an animated fashion.. in that kind of like representation of what social engagement is that we’ve come to see. So that was one of thevery strong things actually that I brought to this processes as an inquiry. And if "Report to an Academy" was kind of a triangle between a third level University, an octopus, and Kafka... Echo's Bones began as a triangle between like North Dublin, autistic young people and Beckett. And there was a lot of different elements to that, I mean there's a lot of reading of Beckett that interprets his work through disability and institutional life in Ireland. He had written the short stories in this landscape that the young people were from, they lived there. So I was really curious about revisiting his work with them, and to see what would they see in it, and to make a work in response to it. So we spent three months over the pandemic doing online workshops, which were partly looking and reading and thinking about Beckett and making things in response, we were partly talking and thinking about autistic representation on screen, and drawing up a set of principles for what the film should be. And this is a very long way round of coming to your point about a restorative approach, because certainly that was something that really came from the young people. And I should be clear as well that... an interest in the institution or something like that... the particular hospital is mentioned in the stories that we looked at, we visited with the young people, we did some filming there, but that's not part of their.... it's not part of all of their interests. You know, they all bring their own

concerns to the film, some of them really wanted to talk about the climate emergency. Some of them wanted to work on music and nothing else. So the institutional part is... the film can be read in that way, but it can be read in other ways also. And one of the really important things to the group was that when it came to questions of their representation, there was a list of things that they drew up collectively, but one of them was that like it is difficult to be disabled, there is no denying the obstacles that society will place in your way, but it is not the only thing about a person's life. And particularly when it came to experiences of the senses, it's not only sensory overload and something that's very painful and difficult, but there's also autistic joy and complete euphoria in that sensitivity, and they really wanted to embrace that as part of however we communicated through the screen.

Iarlaith 21:01
Yeah, and you can really get that sense from the film, because you see it does not focus on the institution or portray it.. it's kind of on the horizon sometimes, it's there, but it doesn't really interact with what you're seeing. And you can also see that the interests of the young people is so broad and accommodated, so there's music, there's poetry, there's jokes, there's these beautiful stills, there is a wonderful approach to costume and colour and you can really see this kind of neurodiverse kind of perspective. In more of a way that that's brought about through an approach to access and like, I'm often thinking about how we make work through access rather than about disability. As disabled artists or practitioners or curators, we're often asked to make work about disability when really it's like, that's not the interesting point. And you spoke briefly about it there. But both of us are kind of big access nerds. That's one of the things we're really interested in, and it really came to light in Echo's Bones in the way it's kind of made in a socially engaged manner, how it was thought about and how you show the work. I was wondering if you could discuss your approach to access generally, but also through Echo's Bones?

Sarah 22:23
Yeah, I mean, it's a learning curve. I think in general, like an approach to

access is about finding out what people need. And that is not a very straightforward question for a lot of people

if they have never been asked that before, in particular. So as part of a methodology, I guess it's also... it’s partly practical, of course, I think it's also partly about identifying the kind of unspoken assumptions of what is the professional art world? Or what are good working conditions? And I think it's also an artistic kind of resource in a way. I think if you find ways of asking good questions, then you can just find a capacity for surprise, I suppose. One of the things with Echo's Bones that happened, there was an interim kind of small, like after that online engagement period, I made a small publication for the group to just kind of materialise some of the things that we had done, and posted it to everybody. Yeah, one of the pieces of feedback was ‘oh, I can't deal with shiny paper, like that is a hell sensorily’, and there was another person who actually had difficulty with paper at all, which led to a whole kind of exploration of what a publication could be without paper. We didn't ultimately have the budget to do to fully dive into that, but I guess it leads to good questions.

Iarlaith 24:12
Yeah, I think I mean, this is something we discussed quite a lot, but I think access as method is probably one of the most interesting ways you can make work. And that brings us on to something that we'll be working on next year, which is a film around the Ballinasloe born artists J.J. Beegan. So to briefly introduce J.J. Beegan, is an artist and sculptor from Ballinasloe in County Galway, which is in the west of Ireland. But Ballinasloe is kind of the Midlands, it feels kind of slightly different. And he came to live in Netherne mental health hospital in Surrey, England, between the 1920s and 40s. He made beautiful delicate drawings on tissue paper, which included drawings of lions, human figures, birds, faces, fish and rivers and really wonderful stuff. But also, in a few works, he names himself as an artist, as a sculptor, he named his name and where he's from, so either Dunlo Street or Dunlo Hill in Ballinasloe. So questioning how do you make work about someone when they are not around or they were institutionalised, their records don’t exist and we don’t have any of their first

hand accounts. But this naming of himself gave us an access point, to make work or perhaps think about J.J. J.J. is from Ballinasloe which has one of the largest mental health institutions in Ireland, now closed. And then he went to live in Netherne which is one of the first to have an art therapy unit which was run by Edward Adamson, who J.J.'s work now sits in his collection, under the care of the Wellcome Collection. So with our shared interests in access, thinking about disability, and thinking about questions of capacity, the rights, the body, language, and the politics of making with and around disabled artists who are no longer with us, and the relationship to institutions, and to broader societal questions around disability, memory, justice, and treatment and what we can do with this kind of legacy. I was wondering if you could briefly speak about your politics around making this kind of work now?

Sarah 25:56
I guess we're going to find out, right? Because every situation is so contingent, but for me one of the quite essential starting points is that J.J. does name himself as an artist. And for me, what I interpret in that is that there's some kind of desire for a profession or a public life really. And that question around naming is so important I think in that context, that like even with a time difference, even with the differences of geography, not being able to know this person... I think I find the idea of naming somebody as an artist who hasn't claimed that identity for themselves very troubling, because even if we would want to be distance from the contemporary art markets, or the kind of mysterious forces at play there, we do bring some of

that when we designate somebody an artist retrospectively. So the fact that he has done that himself I think is really significant. And I'm not as familiar with the work as you are so there's also I guess a negotiation that will happen in the translation between us of 'what was this person doing' and 'what do we want to explore in the contemporary' that isn't imposing something on him or making him a mouthpiece for our own dodgy politics or opinions or whatever they might be. So... I have already spoken about Kafka and Beckett, and I've made work kind of in reference to Eileen Gray as well, all of whom are obviously very esteemed modernist artists. And for

me there needs to be the same level of care and attention, and some kind of intimacy, but also distance that you work out in relation to that person. You are kind of ventriloquizing. But yeah make explicit when the ventriloquy is.

larlaith 28:25
I really like the idea of dodgy opinions and like to approach it that... like all our opinions are dodgy and will change and are unreliable. And how do you make work if you don't know the person? So maybe that's a good place to end it.. On Being dodgy... Thank you so much, Sarah for today., and thank you for everyone for joining us. You can see Sarah's film Echo's Bones in TULCA Festival in Galway, from the 3rd of November to 19th November, it's captioned, it’s audio-described. And there'll be some new images showing for the first time which is pretty exciting. But for now thank you so much for joining us Sarah for this conversation.