



Sound is a Plastic Art: An Interview with Melanie Wilson

[00:00:19] INTRO

Duška Radosavljević: Hello, welcome to the Gallery!

When reviewing Melanie Wilson's second solo show *Iris Brunette* in 2008, the *Guardian* critic Lyn Gardner described it as 'not just a performance, but a state of mind'. This encapsulation was intended to cover several features of Wilson's innovative form in inception including a privileging of atmosphere over storytelling, a transporting use of soundscape and a beguiling speaking voice.

Wilson's fascinating body of work has since then grown into multiple directions but always pushing at the boundaries of each chosen format and subject matter. *Autobiographer* (2011) was an ensemble piece exploring dementia with an audience seated in the round. *Landscape II* in 2013 was a multimedia creation which brought together biographies of specific women separated by time and space; and her sci-fi-inspired *Opera for the Unknown Woman*, co-composed with Katarina Glowacka in 2016 and premiered at the Wales Festival of Voice, was a further expansion of her integrated thematic interests in history, ecology, womanhood, technology and the future. In addition to her authorial theatre work, Wilson has collaborated as a sound designer most notably with director Katie Mitchell, and has also created a seven-part binaural sound work for headphones for the National Trust and Knole House in Kent under the title *Women of Record* (2018).

In this interview, recorded on Zoom on 25th May 2020, Melanie generously shares insights into her formative journey, the specificities of her authorial voice, the value of working live with an audience and of professional collaborations with others – bringing us perhaps a bit closer to what it means to be one of the generation of artists which, back in 2008, Lyn Gardner saw as 'easing British theatre into the 21st century with the tenderness of midwives'.

[00:02:33] FORMATIVE INFLUENCES

Duška Radosavljević: We are doing a number of interviews with people whose performance work foregrounds sound and speech. And we're trying to understand this as a kind of paradigm shift. There is a greater interest in speech and sound in contemporary performance now than maybe by comparison to the 1990s, when it was all about physical theatre, the body, and so on. And your work seems very key in this respect because you were there at the beginning of what we might call a 'paradigm shift' in terms of your performance really intricately using this aspect from the start, and what's maybe interesting is how it's moved from theatre to what you now call 'sound works' for headphones. And also working increasingly as a sound designer, that's kind of developed a different strand of your work, I guess. But for this conversation we'd like to start from the very start, to go back to your beginnings and any formative influences. I know that you went to Aberystwyth and to Central, and that was the formal training part of things, but you could also maybe tell us about what brought you to theatre in the first place, what started off that interest.

Melanie Wilson: It's such a fascinating question, isn't it, to begin with the formative influences, because then your mind goes back and back, and back, and back to being a small child. I was always very musical when I was little, and I did a lot of singing at school, and was in school choirs et cetera. We went on tours around Europe, and so I had quite a robust early beginning of being in a kind of live music setting with colleagues – my school friends – and I was also really interested in drama as well. So I think it was really clear, very immediately I suppose, that I was interested in music and language and performing – it gave me great pleasure. Although I was actually quite shy when I was little, but I think that's probably a common thread along with lots of performers, actually. I can also remember that my mum gave me a tape recorder, and I was quickly extremely fascinated by recording my family talking, animals – it was quite a portable little thing. And of course, recording music off the radio et cetera. So the process of capturing audio was something that was also a real fascination for me. I think



language had a bit more primacy for me than music, or sound necessarily to begin with. And I always wrote a lot when I was little as well. So I guess the kind of combination of the interest in language, and the interest in performing, and event-making, I suppose – I was really into creating little ceremonies and things like that when I was younger – I think this is what drew me to Drama and English as a joint honours. I chose Aberystwyth, the course at Aberystwyth, because there was a very practical aspect to the course. So you mostly made productions, and you got to collaborate with some key, outside artists. And for me, there was an Italian artist, Firenza Guidi, and also Mike Pearson from the Welsh company Brith Gof – so it's interesting that you talk about the kind of physical theatre of the '90s, because that was very much my education at Aberystwyth. That kind of collaborative, devised theatre-making was born there. I think I had probably had an ambition to study Drama from the very beginning, but my mum was very keen on there being an academic string, which is why I went to university – and then I went to Central. Again, my interest in that course, in the MA at Central, was because it is very – the Advanced Theatre Practice course is entirely devised in its approach. I felt quite quickly, quite comfortable there, because the work at Aberystwyth, especially with Firenza was – you know, you were working in kind of groups, ensembles quite a lot so there was a very collaborative tenor to the work, which I really enjoyed. I love that kind of compatriot feel to making. So when I got to Central, you had a kind of main strand, which for me was performing and making, and then you had a sub-strand, and so I chose sound. And I suppose the other thing that had begun to happen for me in – possibly, as a kind of another strand to the mechanical audio capturing – I was really into music, and playing records, and collecting vinyl, and I was an avid participant in the dance music scene in Aberystwyth as well. I was really captured there – I discovered Warp Records and that really experimental approach, concrete approach to sound in dance music setting. So going into Central then, I had this performance-making aesthetic interest in collaboration but also in sound and music as a narrative dramaturgical strand. And it was quite low-key, but it sort of grew. And I certainly left Central feeling that collaboration and devising was where it was at for me, but also beginning to think about computers and how I might create work with a laptop. When I left Central, I formed a company really quickly with another artist, Peter Arnold–

DR: Can I just check what year that was?

MW: That was 2000. I left Central in 2000. At Central I'd met Tassos Stevens, who set up Coney, and through Tassos and the Lion & Unicorn Theatre, which was in Kentish Town, a pub theatre – I met a group of artists who were all creating work, and that early group of people who collected around Tassos, or rather Tassos collected them around him. We made a show called *Pub Quiz* which was a pub quiz. The first round was a quiz in the pub below, and then you went upstairs for the second round, and there was – it was a very political but quite comic, quite avant-garde take on current news. So again, lots of devising. I met Peter Arnold in that work and we set up a company, Patter, and we didn't go for very long, maybe just four years or so, three or four years. He's a production designer now, he works in film more. He's more of a visual artist. So we sort of married ourselves in terms of image and sound, and then as a kind of combined duo of performing and devising. And we made these very surreal, quite comic clown-like pieces that had strong, bizarre visual imagery, care of Peter. And then the beginnings of my sound and composition – or sound as it was then really – for theatre, which was very much about curating sound worlds of existing music and beginning to create my own collages. Yeah, so I sort of had that education [in my early] 20s, finding my way in London, and I felt quite lucky actually. I often say to young artists, who are studying: 'Find good peer relationships!', because I think that was a great benefit for me in the days and the year after I left Central. Because it's quite a tricky time, when you leave and you're trying to make – work out how to begin as an artist.

DR: There was something interesting you said about your personal interest in dance music. To what extent did that particular aesthetic inform your approach to sound, when you started making your own sound worlds?

MW: I guess there was a kind of electronic, abstract aesthetic, which I was really enjoying in people like Autechre, Black Dog, Aphex Twin, all the Warp artists really. And so there was a kind of alien, hard-edged, abstract electronic sound, but often combined with quite warm, analogue sounds as well. So it's less about rhythm and BPM, and more about the aesthetic of sound-making which wasn't instruments essentially, or if it was instruments, heavily processed and alienated. I think what attracted me to that work, and to things like the films of David Lynch, and things like that, is the really hermetic



atmospheres that those electronic worlds create. I think there was something incredibly transporting about that – and edgy and space-making – that I found just really fascinating and wanted to harness. And I suppose that kind of aesthetic has persisted really, and has been expanded, or diverged from it, and it's been joined by other aesthetics. I think there's also the element of sampling in there as well. So sampling of dance music, techno, there's lots of sampling of existing music, but there's also quite a lot of sampling of real-world sounds. And actually, about that time, I became friends with an artist, a collection of artists, musicians, who were making music entirely from sampling concrete sound and real-world sound. And it was quite beat driven, but also really quite narrative and cinematic as well. They were a collection of German and Austrian artists who were living in London, some of whom went on to create Last FM, which was the very successful online radio, streaming platform. I was really absorbing different types of ideologies of sound, and they were quite militant, actually, about not using synthesised sound at all. Being in my early 20s, and hungry, and just, you know, a sponge for things, I was really – that was the first clear ideology of sound that I encountered, I suppose. So I was quite formed around that as well – that kind of interest in sampling, and recording. And of course, thinking back on it, I had had my little tape recorder when I was little. So there was something in there about the world, the sounds of the world made strange that was waiting for another step, I suppose.

[00:13:23] MAKING LIVE LISTENING EVENTS

DR: In terms of the works that you've selected for us for this occasion, we can see that there are some solo works there, but what's quite striking was that *Autobiographer* is the one that's kind of more obviously an ensemble piece, and then there are some where you are a solo performer. And then there are some where you enter into different kinds of collaborations with people. How did that journey evolve? And also your gradually removing yourself from the stage?

MW: Yeah! It's interesting, isn't it? There's these kinds of oscillations. And I suppose when I began, I was very much in the mix of ensemble collaborative work. And then after the company with Peter – and we were also joined by another artist, Emma Benson, who was the director, so we were a little trio for a while – what needed to happen for me, really, is having come from that ensemble-based devised approach, I needed to really discover what I was saying, and what I was. So things kind of pinched. We stopped working together, just because we were interested in different things. And then I had this really tricky, but very defining moment of being on my own for the first time, and trying to work out what to do, because I was still very much interested in theatre as a form, and Peter and Emma were much more kind of gravitating towards television and film. I wanted to continue with theatre, so that's when I – somewhat through necessity but also through interest – that was when I wrote my first solo piece. That coincided with learning a lot more about how to collage and how to edit on a Mac, so I was at that point in the development of sound software where it was becoming extremely easy to use. You didn't have to be a programmer, didn't have to have done computer science, or be an engineer in any sense. It was really like a plastic art almost. So that first piece was me performing, and then I had a sampler on stage with me, and I played the soundtrack live. And that was the kernel, I suppose of my voice – that's where it really distilled. And this relationship between voice and sound being the key interest for me. I suppose, up until that point, the work that I'd made for my own company, it'd still been quite – sound as a kind of background, or an atmosphere, whereas this was very much putting sound as a character, or a property, a narrative property. So that developed, really, and [was] becoming more ambitious, and more sophisticated. And the shape of that work also transitioning away from being end-on portraiture, as it were, as the kind of proscenium arch work, or studio-based end-on work, to *Autobiographer* which was – well, the next thing was *Iris Brunette*, and that was working in the round with small groups of audiences. And *Autobiographer* was in – well, in an oval, rather than in the round. But then, decidedly and explicitly, that was about creating a spatial, three-dimensional experience of sound, as well as a narrative, dramaturgical sensation. And I suppose, with that piece as well, conceptually the voice was becoming of more foregrounded concern for me, and the multiplication of voices. Performing that piece alongside writing that piece for four voices, of which one of them was mine, was a kind of chasing of that interest in fragmentation of voice, and an expansion of voice, but kind of within a psychological frame still of one character.

[00:17:15 to 00:19:19] 'Introduction' from *Autobiographer* (2011)



MW: I feel like the first work that I made, *Simple Girl* was the beginning, and then *Autobiographer* did another kind of growth spurt, I suppose, in my style. And for me, what was becoming clear was the great joy of creating these extremely detailed, very three-dimensional sound worlds which an audience could live within. But the more you come to focus on the properties of that, in some ways there's more emphasis on wanting to perfect and control that, even. So then stepping away from it and becoming a director, or like a more explicit outside-director rather than a director from within, I guess was another development of wanting to enact these sound worlds. And then that's when music became much more strongly – I mean, what I would say about music is that I'm at a point now where I do call myself a composer. And I'm lucky because the definition of composer is very broad now, and there are many composers who don't want to call themselves composers, and then people such as I who are writing music. But it's very much about drawing music into the world of sound, rather than writing music which sound functions within. It's about languages, I suppose. *Autobiographer* was a very detailed, poetic text, and that worked alongside this quite visceral sound – and the way that the voices presented or channelled the text was becoming musical because it was about rhythm and choreography almost. And kind of interleaving. And so stepping out of it and making work then which was drawing music more in, and also collaborating with other composers as well, was about wanting to flex and grow this mission that I had for the primacy of music or the primacy of sound alongside language as a distinct kind of an artform. I suppose that's sort of where I am now, is this balancing act, I suppose, trying to kind of constantly re-examine this relationship between voice and sound and music. They so tightly circle each other for me. And that's why I now mostly collaborate with singers, because the type of work that is available, the type of ideas that are available through the sung voice now, becomes like another ratchet again in colliding the voice, the human voice, with sound and music.

DR: So does that mean that you have left behind the actual theatre-making the way you used to do it? Now that you are primarily a composer?

MW: No, I haven't at all! I think – well, there's a few things to say about that. One, strong one, which is that I think I got very bored with my own voice. I got frustrated by it. But also – it's completely part of my aesthetic as well. I have a very particular voice. Well, everyone's got their particular voice, but my voice was another instrument in the palette of somewhat otherworldly, interleaved, psychological subjective narratives. And so I suppose I sort of wanted to find other textures, other voices. Although interestingly, a lot of the singers that I collaborate with, I guess you could say that their sung voices resemble somewhat of the timbre and the delivery of my own spoken voice. So you know, you can't often I guess escape your biases – or your narcissism, I don't know. But there's just an interest there in expanding the palette of what is possible. But crucially the live act is very key for me, although I have made work which is headphones-based work, which doesn't necessarily mean you're inhabiting a space with performers, has a more refracted liveness to it. The listening event is really – it's the key concept of all of the work I make – but the live listening event is something I'm definitely very much still engaged in. But I guess there's a wish to flex the authorial wings as well, and to not be limited by myself as a tool in terms of the voice.

DR: Yes, you've said so many things there that were interesting to me and that I wanted to pick up on. This 'live listening' you've just mentioned: what is it about the event of live listening, as you call it, that is of interest to you specifically? And that suggests a particular relationship with the audience. It's not satisfying for it to be a piece of music that is recorded. It has to be live. What is it about liveness for you?

MW: Yes. I mean, I do think it's about the body. One of the concepts that underpins *Autobiographer*, say, was the extreme range. When you're in a live space and the system that I designed to play the sound, you're playing with architecture and frequency and so the access that you have to a person's stomach, as well as their cranial cavities and the knowledge of the bodies around them is very much part of the range of narratives that are in play. I think the live iteration of the sound world is so – it's very much about psychological space as well as architectural space. I think that's probably why I've made a few works binaurally, for headphones, because there's something that travels towards that feeling of being situated in a space that can change its identity. And with *Autobiographer* that was – the contraction and expansion of psychological space in real space was absolutely the work. That was entirely the way that it elucidated the experience of dementia – a very breathless journey through these



contracting and expanding spaces. And there's also something like – almost like a gift, I think, for me anyway, when you are in a theatre space and the lights go down or they become dimmed, and for an extended period of time which sometimes in theatre time can feel a long time, but it's actually only a matter of half a minute or less, that sensation of listening before the visual appears is an extraordinary feeling! It still is very captivating and spine-tingling for me, even though I have been in lots of theatres now. I suppose working with Katie Mitchell, doing the sound design for Katie Mitchell, one of the most exciting things about doing that work is that you get to make the work in these big theatres, with these huge sound systems. Although of course the architecture is leading you towards the proscenium arch, and the portraiture of the stage, there is so much freedom and space to play with putting sounds – very bass-heavy sounds and circulating sounds around the audience, but taking away the visual for the moment. It is like a gift if you can allow people that space to be in a theatre, in a communal setting, without having to look for the moment, because the visual is a wonderful thing, but, as we know, it's such a primary sense and it's such a dominating sense, and it cancels out so much in the frequency of sound once the sight begins to be engaged. And so giving people an opportunity to listen, without the logic sense-making of language initially, is a really primal experience. And just making space for that, I suppose, just making space for that, is basically why I make theatre. Because I think it's special and exciting.

DR: That's really beautifully said. Thank you.

[00:27:50] IMMERSIVE THEATRE AS A GENRE

DR: I am interested in how you work, when you work with someone as a sound designer, but I also want to return to something else that I found going through your work and that is the way in which you often describe your work in those blurbs that accompany the works as 'immersive theatre'. I'm just wondering about that particular choice, and especially with some of these works, like *Autobiographer* which was made in 2010 – I'm aware, we are starting to talk a lot about *Autobiographer* even though there are so many other interesting works there as well! But that was 2010 and this term 'immersive' has really become an 'in' term, maybe more towards the mid-2010s – yeah, maybe it was already in circulation by then, but I associate it more with more recent – with the books coming out that are about immersive theatre and so on. What is it in that term for you that encapsulates your work?

MW: It's really interesting that term, because I don't enjoy using it anymore, because it has become a shorthand for something, for a type of theatre, which isn't necessarily immersive. But I suppose, for me, the usage of 'immersive' around that time, was about – *Autobiographer*, the show that came before it as well, they were bespoke theatre spaces. They were kind of installations almost: we created auditoria within existing spaces. So it was almost an installation, I suppose, kind of theatre-installation. From the way that you entered the space, the design of the rostra, the way that the speaker system had been completely designed around the circumference of the space, and also the intention of the work towards its audience, which was very close-up at moments, direct address in some moments, companionable, aggressive, and alienating at other moments – the currency of that work is absolutely on the kind of intimate relationship. I say 'that work', I mean that's what I was trying to do, but [it includes] other work at that time as well. Shunt were contemporaries of mine, although they were a little bit before me. That work, whose identity, architecturally, as well as conceptually, creatively, is about the relationship with the audience and disrupting it. I think that's the sense of immersion that I feel. Perhaps for the fault of the success of that theatre to be so successfully immersive – it feels quite a corporate term now, 'immersive', that perhaps it's something to do with the technology, rather than the intention of the piece. I don't know. That's a kind of wild supposition. But certainly, at that point, there were other companies like Sound & Fury, they were creating work in complete darkness, David Rosenberg has now taken on that mantle. That type of work is disrupting the traditional relationships. And I suppose that that's what earns it that 'immersion'. But I suppose for me, architecturally, yes – but emotionally as well. The subjectivity of the character is very much wrapped around you. So you're encouraged to be within the mind of somebody who is suffering dementia. At this very moment I'm researching artificial intelligence, and again I'm becoming fascinated by being within the mind of a consciousness that is forming itself. I'm sort of finding myself being drawn back to the immersion of 'being within' experience.



DR: Interesting. Did you direct *Autobiographer* as well?

MW: Yes, I did. I directed it, and I was assisted – I had a collaborator, Wendy Hubbard, who helped me as the outside eye, because of course I was in it so it wasn't entirely possible to be holistic about that job. And Wendy is an amazing dramaturg and director, and she's really great at that collaborative approach to creation. So yeah, she's key in that.

DR: Great! It makes me wonder, talking about this particular case where you were a writer, and a performer, and the director – and of course, you had your collaborators as well – but how did you juggle all of those different roles in one piece?

MW: I mean, it was really tricky, but I think it's about a kind of effective process, and for that production, or pieces which involve multiple disciplines of me doing it, it's about the correct sequencing of those processes. So we're talking a lot about sound, and I do position and orient myself a lot in the world of sound and as a sound artist. But really, I will be very honest and say: the thing that comes first is language. When I'm creating a piece of work, I write first, and I will also compose or play with sound motifs, but really the structure of the work comes into play through language.

[00:33:02 to 00:35:58] Excerpt from *Opera for The Unknown Woman* (2015)

MW: That can change of course, but the actual writing words is the first material. And then there's a process of composition and design, and with the intersection of those two things, things begin to kind of move and reform. Having come from such a devised, collaborative beginning, what then happened to me, when I began to work on my own, was an extremely linear process really, of stages: in terms of the conceiving, writing, composing of the work in order to then get into a room with a group of people and stage the idea. It's a really extreme process, of monastic hermeticism almost, and then extreme human interaction. But unless the phases are stacked correctly, I find it's very difficult to be flexible, and challenged, and radical with the piece in its living form. Subsequently, in the larger pieces that I've made, or just in other pieces, it's become really important to be honest with myself about how much I can do, because the level of detail that I'm interested in is significant, and I think it's definitely made me come a cropper a few times, taking on too much work.

[00:36:21] SOUND AS A FORM OF WRITING – WORKING WITH KATIE MITCHELL

DR: It's interesting this journey of beginning as a theatre-maker, a writer and a theatre-maker who uses sound, and ending up as a composer and a sound designer – it's an interesting story, in the sense that what we are experiencing on a more general level is this story of sound design historically being very much an auxiliary function in theatre-making, that we are now starting to understand as an art in itself that entails authorship and authority of its own. You are going from this position of an author towards the position of a sound designer on other people's work. To what extent do you retain a sense of authorship in a situation like that, especially with someone like Katie Mitchell?

MW: I guess the first thing to say is I am a sound designer, technically, but I am sort of not. I mean, Katie is basically the key collaborator, the key other person that I would sound design for. Despite the fact that I am a joyful, and vocal member of the community of sound designers, I always feel a little bit like an imposter really, because there's quite a lot of the range of job skills that I don't have that a classical sound designer will have. I'm really bad at engineering sounds, I'm a kind of creative artist, really. And so in those situations, like with Katie, I'm really lucky to be able to work with some really talented technicians, and programmers, and assistants, who help me with the myriad of things that I don't know. And that's fine, I'm very clear-eyed about that and I'm also very vocal about the fact that sound designers come in many different shapes and sizes. But I suppose with Katie, the key thing really – I guess, the facet of doing that work that makes me feel like I can keep doing it, as in I am worthy of it, I suppose – is the fact that the aesthetic, Katie's aesthetic, and I suppose the kind of efficacy of the times that we work together, is that there is a shared taste. I mean Katie's work is different from mine, but there's a shared aesthetic that means that I get to be what I am naturally, as an independent artist, within her work. Yeah, I feel like it's an extension of my own work, in a way, and I mean, it's kind of a strange thing because you're so very firmly within the auspices of the work of Katie Mitchell. So your own authorship isn't often foregrounded, you're part of a team. And I think that's tricky



sometimes, it can be tricky, but I suppose there's a matched level of aesthetics and tastes and interests that makes me feel like every project that I do with her – and there's been a lot now, I've made ten shows with her, and I can't quite believe the time has gone in that way. But for every project, there is a renewal or a reiteration or an expansion of my own interests. So it's really nutritional in a way, and I think I'm also really lucky to have that work, because it means financially that I have been able to continue committing myself to my own work. That's basically how I've managed to continue existing in theatre, is to work occasionally with Katie and with a few other people. I think that's been tricky for me sometimes, because it has come at the cost of developing my own projects, which have become somewhat fewer and far between. But it's a negotiation that I think artists have to do, and I'm really lucky that when I'm not doing my own work and I'm working on a Katie project, I get to still be probing some of the questions that I have of theatre.

DR: That makes me want to ask two questions, but I'm not sure in what order. One is: how would you characterise that shared taste and shared aesthetic that you've found in the intersection between you and Katie? And the other is: how did it come about in the first place, this collaboration?

MW: Yeah. I'll answer the second one: it was a total chance, really. I don't know, maybe it was the universe aligning – but it was at the Women of the World Festival at the South Bank, and I was part of a project by Fuel Theatre. It was an installation, a garden that we made, and I did the kind of installation sound for it. And this garden featured mini-performances, kind of five-minute performances throughout the day, or throughout the weekend of the Women of the World Festival, of artists who were giving short performances about a woman who inspired them, and Katie turned up with Kate Duchêne to do a five-minute piece about Virginia Woolf, of course. And we met, and we didn't really speak for very much actually, but I helped them to create a setup very basically for their performance, and had a little conversation with them about what they wanted to do. And I guess that Katie was in a moment where she was needing to find somebody for a project and was clearly feeling like she wanted to take a risk at that moment! I don't know, I've never actually asked her why, I just sort of bit her hand off, really, and then the rest is history. But I think what I continue to find so much fun about working on Katie's work, is that everything for her must be through-composed. And we differ conceptually about the agency of that sometimes, but basically, Katie's work begins with sound, and it's never silent, all the way to the end. So they're mammothly intense projects, and sometimes, I get to do sound and music, and sometimes, I collaborate with Paul Clarke, who is the original long-term collaborator with Katie – has been there from the very beginning. An amazing composer, so that again has been an incredible opportunity for me. It's super intense work, but it's got something happening in the sound world all the time. And so I've become much more vocal about talking about how sound is another form of writing in Katie's work. I mean, language and text is definitely on the forefront, but she's very visual and she really leans on sound. It must always be there, because Katie never wants to let the audience off the hook. She always wants there to be some pressure, some momentum, some pulse, some undercutting. I think my taste is probably less brutal than hers, I would say – I'm sort of always injecting some relief, or beauty, but I'm also interested in darkness as well. And so we have conversations about it, and the mix is sometimes in disagreement, but ultimately it's this balance of darkness and light that characterises my work, and I find a place for in hers as well.

DR: Could you describe the process of how you work together? Do you spend a lot of time in rehearsal together? Do you come in at particular points of the process?

MW: It's a very similar process every time, which is: you are there on day one and you're there for the whole time. It's a really strong commitment to be in the room. And it's very similar to a lot of the company, really. Although with sound, as I said, she leans on sound not only to facilitate the rehearsal room but then also to be the soundtrack of the finished piece. So it's really intense, yes – you're there for the whole process. As the projects go by, and Katie has a sort of map, over-mapping teams of people, there's a kind of consistency with the people that she works with. So it becomes an unsaid shared process, we kind of don't talk about it that much. With the work slightly more recently with Alice Birch, the amazing texts often either come before, or just before, or sometimes through the process. So there's not a tremendous amount of creative discussion before the work, actually. It is like a machine, but a good machine. It's an ecosystem, maybe that is a better way of saying it. It's an ecosystem of people, and that's another great thing I would say about working in that team is that you



do get left alone. I guess if your aesthetic and your taste is assured and road-tested then really – I just get left alone to do the thing, really. So there's a lot of freedom.

[00:45:22] FUTURE PROJECTS

DR: Great. What are you currently working on or what might you have started to work on before Covid, and what's the next thing hopefully?

MW: Yes. There's many things, actually. I mean, who knows what the future will bring, but at the moment, there's two – well, there's three projects, but the key one I'm making at the moment is an opera about the BirthStrike movement. So the BirthStrikers are women and men, who are refusing to have children as a protest against climate change. There are similar kinds of organisations and movements in America and Europe and the one in the UK is called BirthStrike, and they're very loosely allied with Extinction Rebellion. But I've become very interested in – what we haven't talked about is feminism. So a lot of the work that I make is interested in feminist ideas, female experience, and especially feminism allied to environmental activism or climate issues. I am very fascinated about what leads people to put their body on the line for political protest. So this project is taking – it's not a verbatim project explicitly, but it's taking a lot of the words and declarations that these women and men have made about why they're doing this – and creating music. An opera, a kind of experimental opera in form, in terms of the opera form. But yes, making a music piece. I'm doing that in collaboration with Jessica Latowicki.

DR: Okay. Oh, yes, from-

MW: Made in China.

DR: Made in China, yes! Great.

MW: Yes, so we're writing that together, and then I'm composing it. We're in the process of researching and writing at the moment. So that's happening.

DR: Does that piece have a name yet?

MW: It doesn't have a name yet. It's just called *The BirthStrike Project*. And it's really fascinating, given what's happened with the pandemic, and how that's crystallised or just slightly shifted everybody's access or angle on the climate emergency, and behaviour change and social organisation and the future. I wasn't able really to work on it for at least the last month, and now I feel like I might be being able to do that. Now things have not exactly calmed down, but there's been an amount of mental processing about the situation. And for me, a deep conviction in wanting to be part of talking about how we can organise ourselves with more care and kindness, and an action in regards to the planet and animals, non-humans. I think music is a big part of the efficacy of that and the understanding of that, because language is a tricky terrain in terms of climate talking.

DR: I'm really interested in what you said about starting with verbatim testimony but being more interested in the musical potential of that. Does that present you with any – I don't know, ethical or technical issues that maybe you wouldn't have if you were simply doing it the old-fashioned way, you know, putting people's stories on the stage?

MW: Yes. Somewhat. I think what we've done is to be quite careful to make quite decided alliances, or relationships with the people whose words they are initially. And from the very beginning of the project, you know, we were in touch with that organisation and told them that we were doing this project and our intentions for it, because they face a lot of negative publicity and malign treatment from the right-wing press and other more niche organisations. So we wanted to be very clear that we were on their side, I suppose. We wanted to amplify that message but also connect it to everybody's experience – you know, this is what these people happen to be doing, what am I going to do? It might not be deciding not to have children or it might be. Or it might be becoming a vegetarian or becoming a counsellor or, you know, any of these changes. So the relationship between us and the BirthStrikers is stated, and it's a negotiation. I think we've gone through just a couple of iterations of text-writing. We're very much in the middle of it. And I think that the ambition would always be to bring those people into the process of it, so that they have ultimate choice and decision about whether we're misrepresenting them. But



often that means shattering and atomising the sense of their language. Some packets of the data can be felt in slightly different ways rather than rewriting.

DR: Yeah, that's a really beautiful way of putting it, also the way in which the spoken language becomes in a way data, sound data. Great. And you were about to tell me about the other projects that you are doing as well, at the same time?

MW: Yes. Yes. Well, yes. I mentioned AI. I'm just in the very beginning of thinking about making a performance about artificial intelligence, and hopefully with the ambition of using artificial intelligence – AI systems to create music live. I think it will be about artificial intelligence and by artificial intelligence. And I'm very interested in the more utopian, counter-narratives of artificial intelligence, beyond 'the robots will eat us' kind of – possibly, because I use computers and artificial intelligence of a sort all the time in my art-making. And there's a certain amount of radicalness in my politics. So I feel interested in artists like Holly Herndon and Mat Dryhurst, who are really trying to create new stories around how artificial intelligence can actually emancipate humans, and how it can be a really positive force for the way that we imagine our relationships, and our futures. So I'm not sure what that is yet, but I'm having some really fascinating conversations with various AI practitioners, and it promises a whole new realm of music learning. I will probably have to collaborate with a specialist because it's going to test me, but it's also really exciting as a tool – as a music-making tool.

DR: That's great, Melanie. Thank you so much. So beautifully articulated, everything.

MW: Oh, good!

Transcription by Kalina Petrova

Clips Summary

[00:17:15 to 00:19:19] 'Introduction' from *Autobiographer* (2011)

[00:33:02 to 00:35:58] *Opera for The Unknown Woman* (2015)

Audio available at www.auralia.space/gallery3-melaniewilson/.

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