

Lou Coleman: *I'll Get a Chair!* – Notes from the Studio

I was asked to join Lou in the studio in March 2017 for three days as she worked on research and development for her project *I'll Get a Chair!* funded by Arts Council. My role in the studio was to be a responder and writer, unpicking themes and responding to ideas and conversations, working alongside producer Sarah Pickthall, collaborator Guy Dartnell, and Harvey Cash and Isobel Ripley who were there to document the work. Quite quickly, those roles became less defined as we tested ideas through practical tasks and exercises and bodies were needed on stage. In this writing I will be reflecting on the questions and ideas coming out of the three days that seemed to be opening new avenues both for the current work and Lou's practice more generally. Those interweaving ideas are around disability/visibility, expertise and the expert, and autobiography in performance.

Lou's previous project, *Unstrapped*, funded by Unlimited, was the first time she has 'ticked the disabled box' (as Lou herself puts it) on an application. It was clear from the outset as we started the R&D work that Lou had some reservations about the direction her work had taken and those reservations and the sometimes difficult-to-articulate hesitations became material for us to work through. In *Unstrapped*, Lou used her medical splints as a way of exploring ideas of having left side hemiplegia cerebral palsy. She approached the splints (items which she no longer uses) as objects outside their immediate function, drawing connections between landscape and the form of this medical instrument, thus questioning their utility as simply one thing. It was also, I suspect, a way to find another function for the splints that she had had to live with for so long and now refuses to use, exploring not only her relationship to them but her disability and her status as a disabled person.

Looking for light-hearted moments and comic potential of the splints, *Unstrapped* continued a vein in Lou's artistic work that examines and illustrates what it is to be and have a body. Lou's now redundant splints were employed to poke at the tension between, in Johnson Cheu's words, 'disability as medical impairment and disability as cultural identity'.¹ Cheu writes:

If disability is simply understood as a bodily impairment that is medically curable, then disability as culture is non-existent. However, if disability exists as a culture, if a disabled body is to be seen as a representational system upon which experiences of disability in society are projected, then medical cure of the disabled body must be understood as a construction.²

Lou expressed some of her experiences such as the one where delegates from a different country asked her whether she was now cured of her condition. These are the questions that seem to make Lou hesitant to talk about herself as disabled or make work as a disabled artist. Ticking the box 'disabled' seems to bring this label and over the R&D period we circled around the idea of whether to bring the issue of disability 'into the room' (whether in rehearsals or in performance) and how possible it would be to avoid doing so.

¹ Johnson Cheu, 'Performing Disability, Problematizing Cure' in Sandahl, Carrie and Auslander, Philip, eds., *Bodies in Commotion: Disability and Performance* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2005), pp. 135-146 (p. 138).

² Cheu, p. 138

Our first day in the studio in March began with acknowledging that Lou wished to move away from some of those ideas and we started instead with a discussion about how to make autobiographical work when some things about you are so obvious to the audience. Lou spoke about how her aim to make autobiographical work so often bumps up against the need to go over the necessary information about her disability. So we started to wonder about the following questions: How do you control the revealing of information, the narrative of your story when clues of that story are taking centre stage? In what ways and to what extent could you withhold information that spectators might think significant or essential? Or indeed, how to tell your story without being autobiographical? The frustration that was evident from Lou focused on the way she can only keep her disability invisible to an extent – you might only notice it when she walks but you will notice it eventually. The lack of choice to reveal or not to reveal her disability when she is on stage means that Lou feels like she has to tell the story of her cerebral palsy whenever she wants to tell anything, even a completely different part of her life. There was a sense in the work over the three days that while Lou would perhaps wish to make performance work about her left foot, or about the assumptions she keeps coming up against with her cerebral palsy, that autobiography is in some ways a very tight and constricting framework where her disability again would be viewed as something fundamental to her or the story she is telling rather than being a part.

Defining 'autobiography' Deirdre Heddon writes:

The self is a performative act, reiterative act, inescapably bound up in the social and cultural discourses that permit certain notions of self to exist (while making other selves inconceivable and/or "unreadable"). Autobiography, a creative act of selecting, of ordering, or editing, of forgetting, of embellishing, of inventing a life is part of this reiteration of a self.³

Throughout the process we were discussing how disabled bodies are viewed on stage and while Heddon's view that the self is bound up in social and cultural discourses certainly chimes when thinking about disability and its representations, it is less obvious that all disabled bodies can forget or invent a life. The problem (and one of the joys) of autobiographical work is that people are nosy about other people's lives, but this sometimes comes with a need to fill in gaps that are visible. In this context then, the disabled artist making autobiographical work becomes an expert or a teacher lecturing about disability to those who do not possess the knowledge or experience. In this sense, disability isn't allowed to remain a part of someone's story but must become the whole.

To put it another way, the audience should be given (full) access to disability. Rosemarie Garland Thomson draws parallels between the male gaze (theorised by Laura Mulvey in her article 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema') and the normative stare that objectifies disabled people. Garland Thomson writes:

The male gaze produces female subjects; the normative stare constructs the disabled. While both are forms of visual marking, gazing trades on a sexual register and staring traffics in medical discourse. Both visual exchanges prompt narrative. Gazing says, "You are mine." Staring says, "What is wrong with you?" Gazers

³ Deirdre Heddon, 'One Square Foot: Thousands of Routes', *A Journal of Performance and Art*, PAJ 86 (Volume 29, Number 2), May 2007, pp. 40-50 (p. 40).

become men by looking at women, and starers become doctors by visually probing people with disabilities.⁴

It is this normative stare that is so powerful in the audience-performer relationship when disabled bodies are the ones performing. What occupied our thoughts throughout the three days was whether Lou needs to be on stage at all (or in the work at all) or whether her work could be performed by others. This would take it out of the realm of autobiography and release her and the work from some of those assumptions.

In the past six years, Lou has trained and then worked as a Feldenkrais Practitioner and this has shifted her thinking about her performance practice too. Feldenkrais has helped Lou to articulate her thinking about disability as a whole, and to find an approach and a language to express her thoughts on how disability is often thought of in terms of parts rather than wholeness and connections. With Feldenkrais, Lou has learned to notice the different ways in which we can relearn or unlearn our movement patterns (or as Lou says: 'do it and notice, and then do it again and notice the noticing'). And there is some of that sensing inside out and outside in that she is now bringing into her work in performance. This is most obvious in an exercise where Isobel and Lou are moving together, or at least in the same space, and Isobel's movement, that of a trained dancer, is in direct opposition to Lou's slow movement which is coming from inside, Lou taking her time to think where her movement is coming from. Occasionally she seems to stop completely, only to be lost in a thought about her moving arm or leg.

Lou seems like an expert when talking about and doing Feldenkrais, as she should be as she has trained for years in a field of very specialised knowledge. But what is then noticeable how that similar type of expertise is lacking in her artistic practice. During one of our discussions I suggest that she is flailing in her performance practice by which I mean she is experimenting with different things and poking at different directions rather than evidencing determination or knowledge that she has when speaking about Feldenkrais. Yet her sense of expertise seems to elude her when trying to articulate how to develop her performance practice and the question might be obvious here, what is a performance expert? Is there any expertise to depart here?

There is also a sense in which the disabled artist becomes the expert (in their disability, and in some ways in disability as a whole) who then stands for and represents everybody in that category to those without this expertise or knowledge. Central to the discussion of expertise is how knowledge is tied up with the idea of power and who gets to speak (and for whom). In her article 'Stupid, Paranoid, Wonderful: Staging non-knowledges in the pedagogical encounter' Johanna Linsley argues that types of non-knowledge or a failure to learn can be 'a political move or a creative act'.⁵ Writing about Aaron Williamson's work *Obscure Display* Linsley refers to it as non-knowledge and 'a failure to learn that rejects learning as a recapitulation of the world as it is and always has been. It is, in fact, an unlearning of this world, and the unexamined assumptions it makes about capacity and access'.⁶ Actually, what is interesting here is that there is no lack of knowledge in Lou's art practice but that that

⁴ Rosemarie Garland Thomson, 'Dares to Stares: Disabled Women Performance Artists and the Dynamics of Staring', in Sandahl and Auslander, pp.30-41 (p. 32).

⁵ Johanna Linsley, 'Stupid, Paranoid, Wonderful: Staging nonknowledges in the pedagogical encounter', *Performance Research*, (17:1) 2012, pp. 59-67 (p. 59).

⁶ Linsley, p. 67

expertise is different. It is what Linsley calls 'non-knowledge' and it is here that those discussions about expertise are thrown into high relief.

So how to think about expertise in the diverse fields of disability, performance and autobiography? If Lou is an expert in (her) disability then it is she who should have the power that comes from knowledge to define the terms in which that knowledge is viewed or disseminated, or received. However, disability is also used a term in itself to distinguish or separate disabled from abled people, or the norm. So Lou, as a 'disabled artist', is only an expert to the extent that she is bound by the terms of knowledge that then categorise her as the object of other people's knowledge (or assumptions). This brings further frustrations, such as occasions when Lou has been asked to be part of something because she has a disability (so that other people can tick boxes) or the way in which disabled artists tend to be discussed in terms of role models (the focus on role models has been particularly apparent in discussions around the Paralympics and the most recent campaign by Channel 4 calling Paralympic athletes 'super humans'). What we were coming up against is negotiating how disability, rather than sitting uncomfortably alongside ability or the norm, can function and be viewed as a strategy to challenge normativity and expose and explore the gaps and possibilities between the (inadequate, unnecessary) terms.

I keep coming back to this question of whether there is any expertise to depart in artistic practice. Furthermore, thinking about Heddon's description of autobiography as 'a creative act of selecting, of ordering, or editing, of forgetting, of embellishing, of inventing a life', is an artist making autobiographical work always an expert, and a reliable one, in that field? To what extent can autobiography be considered an area of expertise? Lou is frustrated by the sense she has that work about disability somehow needs to be or ends up being serious, or that you have to be truthful about disability at all times. An exercise we spent most of our last day together working on was one where a chair is being offered to a reluctant sitter. Or it is not even that the sitter is reluctant, or even a sitter, but that that person does not need to or want to sit down. Taking turns, either Lou or Isobel were moving (or experimenting with movement) and either I or Guy were attempting to place a chair somewhere or somehow in relation to them. This created moments of hilarity where one person is earnestly but in the most ludicrous ways trying to help another who does not require help. The exercise came out of Lou's experience of people around her trying to offer help (sometimes literally a chair) once they realise she has a disability, regardless of whether she needs help. It was in this exercise that we seemed to hit upon the type of humorous and light-hearted mood that Lou was looking for in her work. At the end of the three days, as we came back round to the idea of chairs (suggested by Lou's provisional project title), ideas started to form themselves in more concrete ways. The playful and silly side of the work, which had been bubbling throughout the three days, really began to emerge and take shape.