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## **Shape Arts' Creative Producer Elinor Hayes in conversation with artist Victoria Gray**

**Elinor Hayes:** I'm Eli Hayes from Shape Arts. I'm a Creative Producer, and I'm chatting today to Victoria Gray, who we've been supporting on some recent projects. Today we're going to chat about her latest work, 'Welter,' and kind of her practice in general and her place within the arts. And, I guess, your relationship to Shape as well. So, I guess, to get us going in the conversation, it would be really great if you could briefly introduce yourself and your practice and the work that we're discussing today, 'Welter.'

**Victoria Gray:** Yeah. Thank you, Eli. So I work mainly in movement and performance and my background is in dance. I did conservatoire training at Northern School of Contemporary Dance and I guess my special focus was on somatic practices. So in that sense, the body and movement has always been an obsession for me and also the material that I've used in artwork and sometimes this is realised in live performances but also performances to stills camera and then more recently, working with video. And 'Welter' the work that I've produced with support from Shape was actually, it was started in 2017, which is a long time ago. And it was instigated I



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guess by the Arts Admin artist bursary, which I had been awarded that year, and I'd also had an Arts Council grant. So there's a real pressure to make a new work but I was really struggling to start.

And I think you know, that was a bit of a turning point in my practice, but also in my life. That year I'd also just had my autism diagnosis, which was really kind of fundamental in terms of shifting things, both in terms of my life and my practice as well. And I was trying to reframe both of those things at the same time. So in essence, really, 'Welter' is like a, I see it like an experiment or like a... it's like a threshold work if you like. And it was really difficult to make because since about 2011 I've been developing a whole movement language that became a body of work called 'Ballast', and I'd been touring that for about two years. So I think 'Welter' was like an attempt to break out of 'Ballast' because it becomes so ingrained and so patterned in my body. So it was also an attempt to process the autism diagnosis at the same time, and shift from making live performances to making videos or performances to camera.

The practice I've had over the last 10 years or more is really I guess, I've been known for making live works. But I think you know, I'd realised just how fatigued I'd



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gotten from touring and performing for over 10 years, so I was really trying to find a new performance language but also a new form for making work and sharing work. So it felt a little bit like I had to break out of or maybe break into my body and my practice in order to do that.

**EH:** That's really interesting, especially where you brought up the relationship between 'Welter' and 'Ballast,' because obviously as we've been supporting you over a period of months, we've had a lot of conversations and putting 'Welter' in conversation with 'Ballast' as two works but also those two experiences for you as an artist and practitioner has been quite present in those conversations.

And I'm really interested I guess here in the choice of names and the parallels that they might illustrate or indicate. Obviously 'Ballast,' I mean – I had to Google some of the definitions – but it makes so much sense, once you read them. 'Ballast,' which means material or structure that provides stability, carries with it a sense of definitiveness. It's very clear-cut and feels very stable. 'Welter,' on the other hand, is both a verb and a noun to begin with. And it's much more slippery, it means both a confused mass and the act of moving turbulently, kind of writhing. It has edges of both positivity and negativity to it but mainly, at least I think, it indicates ambiguity.



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Jeff, who's on our team as well, when we were watching the film he noted that there's a kind of sense of rigidity in the movements that you make during the work, something mannequin-esque or wooden maybe about the way your limbs jolt, which also contrasts with the notion of *welter* as a more fluid, continuous movement. So I'd be really interested to know whether the relationship that these two names have corresponds, in your opinion, to the parallel themes of both works. In other words, do you feel as though '*Welter*' is an expression of this ambiguity and confusion, that I guess you were kind of touching on just now, in a way that '*Ballast*' wasn't?

I know that for you both of these works and their names sit firmly within a wider attempt to communicate part of your own autistic experience, so do the names and their corresponding works also indicate a changing relationship in that respect, with your neurodivergent identity? I know that you have talked about 'autism' being somewhat of an unsuccessful attempt to name an un-nounable experience, which echoes the instability of the word '*welter*,' at least for me.

VG: Yeah. Absolutely. It's so good that you've picked up on the titles because they are intentional. I think everything that I do has probably a lot of research or a lot of



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thinking behind it. A lot of layers. So just to think about them in contrast, just to go back to 'Ballast' that was actually made during 2011 through to 2017. And around that time, I'd had a lot of chronic stress and actually experienced an eating disorder as well, which I now understand as kind of being part of my experience of being undiagnosed autistic for such a long time. So I'd had a disturbance in my kind of endocrine system, which meant that I had stopped menstruating. So in hindsight, I can really see how much this was like a physical expression of all those burnouts and this kind of bewilderment of being in the world but not knowing that I was autistic.

So, it might seem simplistic, but with 'Ballast', I was taking principles from a somatic practice called 'Body Mind Centering', which was developed by Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen. And I was using the movement exercises to see if over time by attending to the organs and the glands, I could try and affect some change in my nervous system. And so in that sense, 'Ballast' was really about, I would say, rooting and grounding into the organs of my reproductive system to see if I could find a really concrete place and space for those organs and glands to try and, I suppose the paradox would be to sort of ground them and still them, in order to then produce some kind of flow back into my system. And my body was just so shut down at the



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time. There was such a numbness and disconnect and no pleasure, no stimulation, just absolute dryness and shutness and actually a lot of pain and so the 'Ballast' it feels like a kind of amalgamation or a kind of grouping of a lot of things kind of stuck together.

So in BMC, there's this practice where you can move into and out of an organ or gland and it's really lovely. The idea is that you might awaken it or find its expression. So whilst in 'Ballast', it might appear quite still, it's quite a concrete work almost kind of sculptural. There's lots of these micro movements that are going on, on a kind of organic level where I'm kind of gently rocking or vibrating my organs as I'm moving. And I'm not sure if it's coincidence or not, but I mean, probably but after practicing it over several years my menstrual cycle did actually come back in December of 2018. And I do think that there's a relationship between the practice and then actually what it kind of brings about in the body. So then with 'Welter', as I said before, I started again, quite pragmatically, but really from a place of uncertainty. And again, I wanted to kind of think about the language of 'Ballast', but sort of get it out of my body. So I was looking at the shape and dynamic of 'Ballast', and then just trying to find the opposite as a starting point. Especially, I was thinking about the relationship to gravity that I had in both of the works. So 'Ballast' was kind of on the ground the



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whole time, I was kind of glued to the ground, almost like clinging onto it and very rooted and steady and balanced. And I was moving very slowly and very elongated and my eyes were closed, so it's quite a shutdown kind of work. So when I started 'Welter' thinking more, okay, I have to be on my feet, I have to be standing up, I have to have my eyes open. I have to be moving preferably quickly, and in quite an unstable way. And then I just felt like 'oh my god', this is just not my instinct at all. It was so awful. It was like getting blood out of a stone, it felt very unnatural to move like that. And looking back I realise just how much, you know, since forever I've made work that is durational and slow, has stillness and my eyes have been closed. And I've also made quite minimal works which, you know, one movement over a long time with muted colors, very . . . almost quite restful works, very meditative works. And I think it's very significant that you've noticed the differences in the titles because yes, when I was making 'Welter' actually there was a lot of turbulence, a lot of uncertainty. And it was a very, kind of, both deliberate and also instinctive attempt to sort of explore that.

But just to just to speak to that question, about the kind of relationship to neurodivergent experience. I think the form and shape of the works are interesting too, because 'Ballast' was kind of made before and 'Welter' was made after



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diagnosis. But I think both of them reference neurodivergent - my experience of being autistic because it was always something that I am. It's not something that occurs after the point. So it's been really interesting to look back at 'Ballast' and think, wow, how much of that actually speaks to this kind of need for repetition, stillness and sameness and soft colors. I think it was instinctive to try and still the world a little bit, which for me, I really liked this expression from Erin Manning, who's a philosopher and writes a lot about autistic perception. She talks about how the world comes teeming in. And welter, actually, is a word I've actually taken from Erin's work. She uses that term a lot to describe when she writes about autistic experience. So the sense of 'Welter' was that I was kind of projecting into an unknown future. And it does feel a bit like that. So it was like a stepping stone I think, a bridge between pre diagnosis body and practice, post diagnosis body and practice. So in that sense, it's a work. It's a little bit out of time. It's past, present and future and very, very different to 'Ballast', which was very rooted and much more strong. I kind of knew where I was at all times within it, 'Welter' was a welter.

**EH:** And I guess, on the topic of language, it's also interesting how present and significant the choices you make about language are to your practice, given that many would see the works themselves – for example 'Ballast' and 'Welter' – as kind





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of embodied and nonverbal entities. Especially on your website, you refer to works as 'singularities,' which I've never seen before, particularly within the performance context. So, I was wondering how that label came about and whether it reflects something deeper or a specific relationship you have to your work or within your work.

It's also evident from the lists of 'forces' that you include with your work, which I really love, I thought was really interesting. They're kind of like glossaries, which provides so many new entry points for your audience. I wondered if you could talk us through those lists and what you see their purpose to be?

**VG:** Yeah, definitely. Thank you so much again, because you've noted the singularity and it's very specific, that language choice, I think I like to play around a little bit with, first of all, what a work is, what it's status is, in terms of 'art.' But the word at least as I've come to use, it is actually a reference to Deleuze. I know it's boring, but it's true. Actually, from 'The Logic of Sense'.

I could give you a very quick definition because I think it's really helpful just to sort of explain that a little bit. So Deleuze writes that 'singularities are turning points and



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points of inflection, bottlenecks, knots, foyers and centers, points of fusion, condensation and boiling points of tears and joy, sickness and health, hope and anxiety, sensitive points’.

So when I read that it just encapsulates what a work is for me. I've always struggled with the idea of being an artist or making objects that are static and for consumption. So having a website for example, is really something I really struggle with and having that tab that says ‘work’. It makes it sound both more than what it actually is, but also much less than what it is in its totality. For me, it's much more than an artwork.

So on the one hand, it might seem like a politicised thing to say I’m resisting objects or static things or a resistance to capitalism, or the art market. But I do feel a bit allergic to that, but it’s more to do with, I suppose, ‘the how’, of how a work in inverted commas comes about so for me, it's an exactly that manner of a singularity. It's when there's a turning point or a place where there's a knot or a tension. So a new work seems to happen when I reach a point of a condensation so there's emotion, pain, illness, for example. Precisely a bottleneck. And I think that's really clear for example in ‘Ballast’, because I'd obviously reached a bottleneck with my period stopping and I guess the effects of not eating and being malnourished. But



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'Welter' as well is a sensitive point, was made at a sensitive point. I just received the autism diagnosis and was being supported through my Arts Admin and Arts Council bursaries to try and redefine my practice in terms of neurodivergence, and this was very, very new because it was July in 2017 that I'd finally gotten a diagnosis and started to make some sense and then it's very common for people, especially people diagnosed later on, so I was 36, to sort of, kind of, look back at everything in their life and try and make sense of it.

So it was a very, very condensed period of time. But what was really nice about it was that Arts Admin, because they're so brilliant and so open, they actually let me use the bursary towards really weird studio spaces or practices and try and explore them. So I used the funding to explore three different spaces for making work. So I went to Bowen therapy, Existential Psychotherapy, and I also started attending Quaker meetings. It sounds really bizarre. But I tried to conceive all of those spaces as like a studio and all the things that happened in those spaces, including the talking therapies, as part of the making process or maybe even as performances even if they didn't have a wider audience.



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So I'd go to Bowen therapy, which I don't know if you know what Bowen is, but it's a really intricate hands on therapy where there's really precise touch, and it stimulates the nervous system. And then I was going to Existential Psychotherapy, which was quite unique really, because in my experience of talk therapies, with mental health services, which was usually psychoanalytical, CBT, it never worked, it never spoke to me. Existential approaches really sort of drew on the philosophy that I was interested in and really intersected with art and the spiritual practices too. So it seemed to be more generative.

And then I was going to a Quaker meeting every week. And I actually used the Meeting House as my studio space and I made the video there as well. So there's this confluence between this attempt to acknowledge the other dimensions of practice which might fall outside of art, which might be therapeutic, philosophical or spiritual. So, I think that that's the reason why I find it really, really limiting to say 'work', because it is both more or less than that. So for the exchanges that I had at Bowen and in psychotherapy and in the Quaker, they were like pseudo performances and weirdly all within walking distance of each other so I could literally go from a Bowen session five minutes down the road, walk straight into a psychotherapy session. And then even more bizarrely, and this was pure



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coincidence that the psychotherapists house, which is where my sessions took place, was actually next door to the Quaker Meeting House. It was literally a narrow, tiny little snicket, a little lane separating the two buildings and from inside of the Quaker Meeting Room, they had really high windows and you could see the gable end and the roof of the psychotherapist's house. It was really intense and probably not recommended. So I think it's exactly this intensity or this excess, where I think the word singularity builds for me more appropriate, and also where the glossaries and lists come in. Because a work is so much more than its title, even though it's important, 'Ballast', 'Welter', it gives a handle to hold on to. It's more than that, more than the video or a post on Instagram. I mean, I don't have Instagram, but I think that the work or the forces that have moved it into the world kind of exists outside of the artifact bizarrely, so it's like a virtual relationship to the work. So for everything that I've done, I've tried to list those forces that are not apparent, but maybe I would like to acknowledge them.

I've just gone to my site, actually and I could read the one for 'Welter' as it is currently if that would be good to give an example. So the forces that feed into 'Welter'. This is what I've written so: 'vision anomalies; angor animi; vision therapy; occupational optometrist; divine light; sensory profiling; Julian of Norwich; brown



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noise; cervical vertigo; green filter; propranolol; Quaker; exiting; syncope; midline shift to the left; Dorothy Wordsworth; skull meets C1 vertebrae; seeing with the brain; diazepam; prayer; spectrum; bowen; Golnar; binasal occlusion; anti-glare coating; poor optical convergence; presyncope; Hildegard of Bingen; blue control lense; god; colour overlay; suboccipital tension; postdrome; out-of-body; Sara Coleridge; jittery; floating; C1 - C7 vertebrae; groundless; Irlen Syndrome; vestibular rehabilitation; blackout; orthostatic lightheadedness; shaking; sertraline; LED; cranial nerve VIII; St Teresa of Avila.' So it's a bit of a mouthful but it's basically just a list of references to medication that I've been taking, my glasses prescription, various vision therapies, Quaker and Bowen obviously, the name of my Existential Psychotherapist is in there if you can spot it, different cranial nerves that affect vision. I think it's interesting isn't it, though that they're kind of at the end, on the website looking at it. It's right at the end after all of the work like they're a footnote or an appendices, but actually, these are much more constitutive of what the work is, than what it appears to be as an art thing. So I guess 'Welter' is not really the video, it's actually the view of the psychotherapist's roof from being inside of the Quaker Meeting Room. That's how I feel when I connect to it or the way that my Bowen practitioner would really nip my skin in a really precise sort of way. And maybe the work is just as much this list of forces than it is the video. I think I can get quite frustrated that I can't communicate



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the excess. There's a sense of infinity, it's always a bit underwhelming when you make something because you think well, it's so much more than that. But I can't quite communicate it or it can't be contained in the video. My dad said that my brain works like Wikipedia. Everything that I see or experience is this involuntary experience of all of the things that it's also related to actually or potentially, just a web. It's quite hard to explain, but it's like a sifting, or wading through of that all of the time, which is 'Welter' and this teeming in-ness that I was talking about before. And I think that's where the creative potential is, which is exactly the singularity. But I think as well, it can also be quite frightening at its limit point, which is also where I've gotten to in the past.

EH: It's really interesting to listen to you talk about that and I guess quite nicely moves us on to what I wanted to ask you about next which is, I guess this sense of frustration or this kind of undefinability as it relates to your neurodivergent experience and creative expression. I mean, you've done such a good job of moving us around the circumference of that frustration, and I know it's a frustration that a lot of neurodivergent artists experience, but obviously it is quite an individual situation that people try to deal with or try to communicate quite individually. And you've written about how much of this work is itself about making sense of or reassembling



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a topography that's disjointed and asynchronous, to become a welter, like you said earlier. I definitely felt that translate even before I read the context and as you were just saying, the 'rest of the work,' which is the forces list and stuff like that. Because as I watched those first frames, it really struck me as some kind of Rorschach Test or an optical illusion, you know with the shapes and the shadows.

Having spoken about this viscosity of autistic experience and how it manifests in you – you said that 'gravity works on you diagonally' – did you face any challenges artistically in trying to communicate this? I mean, obviously, we've touched on how frustrating it might be, but as someone who also experiences vertigo, I do appreciate how hard that kind of – when you said 'gravity works on me diagonally' – that's really hard to describe, but you've kind of done it there. Or, at least, you've sparked something which makes it a lot easier to understand. Because you're trying to convey something of the essence of a sensation that's almost entirely non-verbal, but you're not reconstructing the overwhelming sensorial experience that often accompanies it. You know, I'm not feeling like I'm experiencing vertigo at the same time, but I somehow know it and I get and relate to it. It's really subtle and stealthy, but the affect that it engenders is so accurate if you've experienced it before. So I'd really like to dig into that and see whether the challenges you faced were kind of – I





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mean, obviously some of them will be not to do with art at all – but the creative challenges I'm really interested in.

**VG:** Yeah absolutely. I mean when I started to make it I didn't start with an intention to make something like this. This is kind of what happened in the process. But I think that the starting point, really on a very basic level, was just to destabilise the language of 'Ballast' so that I could start to explore other dimensions of experience. And what I always do when I start to make a work, is I don't start with a narrative necessarily, but I start with some rules that I can apply to my body and they're sometimes quite abstract as well. And I think it's really important what you said there about maybe trying to, for myself and embody or inhabit a sensation, but not necessarily want to produce - I don't want to produce pain or nausea necessarily in the audience. I think that's something that I learned from performing 'Ballast', is that it was a very intense performance. And a lot of times people would come up afterwards and ask questions, or they'd say that they felt disturbed by it or upset by it. And I remember there was a young girl in the audience at one of the performances in Canada. She actually spoke French and her mum translated what she'd said about the performance, but she'd said that when she'd watched me perform, she felt pain in her legs. And that was on one hand really amazing because one of the things



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I was trying to explore in 'Ballast' was pain, I guess, and that's what I was feeling when I was performing and it had communicated to this other body. But I also felt like a tremendous sense of responsibility, or at least I needed to acknowledge that there was something that I was doing that was gonna perhaps have a kinesthetic effect on the people who are watching the performance, especially this young girl, I was a bit horrified that she felt pain when she'd watched it.

So I'm interested in how deep can you go both for myself when I'm making something, but also how can you keep a safe distance as well from the work and the ideas. And also then think about a safe distance for audience members or people who encounter the work as well. I think that is really important. So I think one thing for me that neutralises a little bit of that intensity is just to set rules when I make a work, so it's more like a game when I start. I kind of trick myself into doing it. So the rules for 'Welter' were I had to be on one leg for example, and I needed to have my eyes closed, and my head needed to be dipped down so my forehead was like looking at my navel. And that, by virtue of abstract or quite concrete set of rules, I could then produce this sensation without necessarily trying to express difficulty or pain or something. What was coming out from this set of rules was something of the effects of that so I like to set these impossible tasks. In the case of 'Welter', actually



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the task was for, it's going to sound really strange, but my head and my arms and my legs to be moving in three different spacetimes. It's a bit like that thing where you pat your head and rub your belly or something. I'm really fascinated by these conundrums with the body so I wanted everything to be very disconnected. So I'd have my arms move in response to like physical memories from being in Bowen or maybe have my arms mimic some of the gestures that she might make on my body. My legs would move in relation to maybe the feelings that came up in Existential Psychotherapy and then maybe my head and my neck would start moving in relation to the sense of being seated at a Quaker meeting, something like that. But it's not literal. It's more a prompt to get me moving. So then, what came out is exactly as you described it, this asynchronous, vertigo-like, weird typography where everything's out of sync, but at the same time, everything's trying to integrate as well.

It's an impossible task but it's as close a description, as in not a verbal description, but a physical communication of what in my experience, autistic sensory experience and also verbal communication can feel like it. I've written something down actually, a few days ago. I'd written it with my left hand and I write with my right hand. So it's a little bit weird and it looks a bit funny, but it says 'Nobody communicates right. Sometimes it's like I'm talking with my left hand.' And that's a little of what it feels like



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to communicate some of this stuff. For me, there's like this slippage all of the time with language and even with movement.

And I think, probably acknowledging that Sam Williams, who was my collaborator, he was filming the movement, and I think that has a huge bearing on how that sensation translates. It was surprisingly easy, actually, at the point of filming, mainly because Sam is so skilled and so intuitive with the camera, he works somatically with the camera and kind of moves with it. It was more like a duet, with me, Sam and the camera. So I'd start moving and Sam would decide on a specific location on my body to aim the camera, and try and keep it there on that location, regardless of how much I was moving about. And we'd try different places; each video was labelled – underarm, nape of neck, cranium, elbow, right shoulder etc . . .

And what emerges then is this confluence of body and camera both moving simultaneously with a kind of dizzying centrifugal or spiral motion. And it wasn't necessarily intentional, it was much more improvisational, a bit like contact improvisation I guess. It's like what you said before about verb and noun. So with Welter I think, as opposed to Ballast, rather than make a work that situated my body,



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and the body of the viewer, I wanted to become the Welter itself, and then create that sensation.

**EH:** That's really interesting to hear: that thing you were just saying about trying to communicate but it being somewhat deliberate, somewhat spontaneous, and the thing that you said about speaking with your left hand. In the context of your work, I really love the reference to Emily Dickinson's 'I felt a funeral in my brain.' Obviously, the parallels are clear. Both of you are, by very different methods, communicating something about this languageless, repetitive, internal, very sensorial experience. And coming to terms with something quite undefinable in language as it's traditionally understood.

In Dickinson's poem, she talks about this sudden, omnipotent bell that appears to come from the entire world at once. She says: 'Then Space, began to toll,' which I think complements the sensory experience of the soundtrack of 'Welter,' which is also ambiguous and fragmented, but feels pretty sourceless and pervasive. I know that Emily Dickinson is thought to have been autistic, though obviously that's a retrospective label, and it's clear from her work that she's engaging in discourses



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around, quote unquote 'alternative' mental, neurological, and social experiences, particularly from the perspective of a woman. And she makes use of poetry to communicate those ideas and thoughts and experiences, whereas you turn to movement and to sound and to more sensorial communication.

I know that we've touched on this, and you just gave us a bit of insight how those languages come about, but I was wondering if you could just maybe go in a little bit deeper about how, as an artist, through time as well, how it's changed through your practice, and through your life, how you've developed this kind of non verbal language, and how it relates to the work and how it relates to your life and to your practice. I guess in my mind I kind of imagine it as a map of language, even though obviously we've already discussed that it's quite hard to give it an allegory like that because it's quite undefinable. But I was wondering as well, do you feel like you have trust in those impulses, or do you think there's an element of moderation? Is the body language by you as you create the work, or do you lead by those kind of impulses?

**VG:** It's such a brilliant question. First of all, the reference to Emily Dickinson. I just loved this reference so much. It actually came about a year after the filming of the



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'Welter', or at least initially, so as I explained, when I filmed it in November 2017, we didn't get to really finish it for several years. Because I'd had, I guess you would call it a clinical breakdown or a mental health crisis, which was quite severe. So we really haven't finished it until about four years later. And it was really strange because in December of that year, it was on Christmas Day actually, my vision just sort of changed. I can't explain why it happened. I think I just started to dissociate and the contrast between light and shade, it just became really pronounced. It was really scary. I had several months of sedatives and lots of fear and trying to figure out what was wrong with me.

And then I started to really learn more about vestibular migraine and vision anomalies and read a book by Oliver Sacks called 'Migraine' that terrified me, but it explained a lot of the experiences that I think I've been having. Even a sense of dread or sense of dying, that some people have described with the acute attacks of migraine. So when I read, 'I felt a Funeral in my Brain', it just encapsulated so well, what I'd experienced at the time but just hadn't been able to put into language.

Reading it was like a perverse kind of joy. It was a relief to find what I couldn't explain articulated elsewhere. And I do think I reach for sometimes poetry or



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something else to initially point to that and go 'it's kind of like that for me, but not quite', and then I'm going to work back and try and find how for me would I say "I felt the funeral in my brain." Well, I said that through 'Welter'. Through a physical language. I think people have questioned whether Emily Dickinson was autistic. I know that people have also said that about Dorothy Wordsworth and Hildegard of Bingen, who was also said to suffer from migraines. So I think there's definitely nice connections there. But in terms of the non verbal or non linguistic, yeah, it's definitely intuitive. And it definitely takes me a long time. I mean, in this case, it's four years. It's kind of the longest time to make what is a relatively short video.

But as I said before, I don't start with a concrete idea and a narrative but these physical puzzles or these deliberate limits where I'm doing something kind of impossible, but it involves a lot of waiting then to see actually, just setting a process in motion and just seeing what patterns emerge in the body and then having a bit of trust that something will come but not force it. Which is really difficult in art, because often you're driven by deadlines and endpoints where you need to make a work and my body seems to resist that, it genuinely feels like it needs more time than it's given to do something. So in essence when I started making what is now 'Welter', I didn't plan to make work at all about vertigo or migraine experience. I think that's because





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I'm used to feeling like I try and communicate something but it just doesn't land right or at least I feel like it doesn't. So maybe there's a feeling of futility that if I try and make a work about something, then it's probably going to fail. So maybe I just need to again, set up these abstract propositions and then just see what comes.

And I think it's interesting thinking about where the work was made and filmed, because that was in the Quaker meeting house. And there's a synergy which if you think about the principles of Quaker which is silence and waiting. Speaking at a Quaker meeting, it only happens when there's like a real pull to do that after a period of time and to trust that there's, I don't really like this word, but an "authenticity" to that call to speak or in my case to move. Which is also connected to a practice called Authentic Movement, which is a somatic practice that I've drawn onto and it again, weirdly connects to Quaker because in Authentic Movement you would still the body and then wait to move from intuition or a kind of discernment of some kind of an impulse.

I went to the Quaker meeting house everyday for a couple of months, between September and November. Nothing really happened for a really long time. I basically put the heating on, waited, it was a really cold building and some days I just fell



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asleep actually, by the radiator or tried not to eat biscuits from the kitchen. It was really difficult to do anything.

And then when I started to actually move I would just film on the laptop. The laptop would be at the other end of the room like this kind of silent observing thing. And then I'd just watch it back, sort of like squinting, not trying to look at it, but just like just gently looking just to see what patterns might emerge and then tried to think about how I could accentuate or ingrain some of those patterns. And then the work would come from that but in essence it is very intuitive, very instinctive. And I guess you start to build trust, in that when you can see those same impulses emerge over time.

And I use drawing a lot too. So again, with my eyes closed. I think it's probably a bit like automatic writing, but I guess you would say automatic drawing. It's definitely not drawing in the sense of something that you would frame but it's like a map of a space and I like to accrue those drawings and see that maybe similar shapes start to come out of a drawing and that they might then be echoed in the physicality as well.



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I think because it's so deeply intuitive and somatic I think I frighten myself a little bit, that you can kind of go into such a deep state in your psyche or your nervous system that you might actually make stuff happen. I was really freaked out after I made 'Welter' because I had no intention of really thinking about any of this vertigo-like dissociative stuff, but I then started to experience it in December and it's like I had manifested it. It's a mystery but I sometimes get scared when I talk about it too much but I also feel really compelled to do that, it's really morbid. It's the pull towards something like Emily Dickinson, 'the Funeral in my Brain'. I've always been drawn to that. That kind of a space. It is definitely where the work happens for me.

EH: It's interesting, this circle back to Emily Dickinson, because I feel I like, like you were saying about manifesting experiences, I feel like I've got this bell tolling in my head now as we talk. And I know that obviously the soundtrack for 'Welter' is hugely important and feels very deliberate, and I'm sure it is based on everything that you've been sharing with us. It's kind of asynchronous, it's amplified. It chimed for me with something that you wrote on your website about the uncanny feeling of an echo in your legs when you step off an escalator, that experience of being out of time which you touched on earlier but grounded in and speaking to your environment.



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You talk a lot about the influences of forces on your artwork, which we've already discussed, but I was wondering if you could talk us through how you approached the audio for 'Welter.' And, if you're happy to tell us, I was wondering what the sounds that we're hearing are and how you decided to illustrate their relationship with the more visual elements of it.

**VG:** It's really funny that you said it sounds deliberate. I mean, that's really good because actually it's really accidental or a product of circumstance. Because we filmed it and then I became ill we didn't actually get to edit the film more, or reshoot it. The original intention was to just experiment in the meeting house. So the footage actually, that is now the film was just what we thought would be a rehearsal or figuring out and then we were going to find a location or a studio and then film it "properly." Obviously that never happened. And the more years passed, the more artificial it seemed to book a space and then try and recreate that material four years later. So it became more interesting and also necessary to use what we had in terms of the footage and just work with it.

I like that we thought we're just doing this rough rehearsal but the universe was laughing at us and saying 'no, this is the thing, this is what you've got'. So I mean,



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what we were left with was sort of strange and I'm explaining this because it just relates to how we ended up with the sound. But in the filming that we had there were lots of visual noise in the Quaker Meeting House. Like there were radiators and chairs and tables and things. And because we couldn't film again we had to just go through this painstaking process of chopping into the material, basically anything that had too much stuff in it, especially a radiator, we got rid of. And as it turns out, this was brilliant because what we ended up with was this really choppy structure, these really clipped bits of material, only a few seconds long in some cases, that are then all kind of mashed together. I was saying this to a friend, it's like a bag of broken biscuits. It's like these little shards of things.

And so the same goes for the sound, the raw sound that you can hear, it's just what the camera picked up on the day and we were not thinking about sound at all. We were just messing about filming with visuals. So you can hear a scratching sound and that'll be my feet with my socks on and the carpet was a really coarse, thin, wiry carpet. I think you can probably imagine the kind of thing and it was on top of floorboards, so there's a banging sound that you can hear and that's me losing balance and switching feet as well. And then you can hear breath. So Sam breathing, me breathing. I can't tell which is which because we were so close



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together and so it's really just whatever sound the camera picked up from that bit of filming. That's what we had.

And then after we've gotten a basic edit of the visual footage Sam, then played with that sound and tried to distort or amplify certain things. And then we experimented with, and I think this is really important, making the sound go in and out of sync with the movements to add to that kind of out of time feeling.

We sort of liked what we had but then thought there's maybe more we could do to sharpen it because there's a lot of banging and scraping sounds and I found actually it was quite difficult to listen to. But there were other sounds I could kind of hear underneath that which we wanted to try and draw out. So we sent it to Jonathan Webb, who's an amazingly talented sound designer. He works a lot in film. And he's really experienced in working with sound from archives and sound restoration. So it was really subtle what he did to restore some of the sounds. So he evened out the balance of sounds, we've sort of rescued some of those really subtle sounds and made them audible because again, the banging and so on is quite dominant. And so if you listen to it on headphones I think he has been able to pull out lots of micro sounds would have otherwise been drawn out. I've been able to hear lots of things in



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it and things like a rumbling belly, I can start to hear breath and I think it's a little bit like being able to hear the inside of your head. So if you've ever had your ears blocked, you know that it's a kind of suffocating amplification.

**EH:** It's interesting as well that you used the word 'choppy' there because I was really imagining and kind of like that sensation of being hit by waves, over and over again. When you think you're having fun jumping in the waves and then you get hit by a big one. And it's kind of funny because that always gets water in my ears. So that whole kind of physical experience was really sparking that for me.

**VG:** There's definitely something watery about it. I've actually found it quite difficult to listen to because I have really sensitive hearing, hyperacusis and tinnitus and I find sound quite triggering. Sound is a real, uhm, poltergeist for me. I'm afraid of sound, I'm afraid of it occurring and waiting for the next sound that's going to freak me out. It produces a really almost PTSD like effect in my body. So actually, when we edited it initially, I couldn't listen to it for a very long period of time actually, even now, I don't really like to listen to it because my brain sort of records sound. So for example, if there's a Hoover on or even the oven, I will hear it for a long time after it's stopped. I think this is also quite common, maybe some of the sensory differences for autistic



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people as well. So sound is like a sensation for me. And I think I had to tread carefully in terms of how much I listened to it. The whole thing, the film and the audio, I was thinking about this before we talked, it's like a ghost or something because I'm not that body anymore. And as I said before, the film felt a little bit like a premonition because I didn't have a lot of the things that it references, or I'm referencing now in hindsight like migraine and visual disturbance. They were maybe present but not as strong or I had not registered them yet. I hadn't heard them yet. Or I was hearing them but not on a conscious level. They were just there under the surface. So it was as if this was all around the corner to come. So when I watch it or listen to it I can feel a bit scared sometimes, like there's this feeling of foreboding, but maybe also quite healing as well to think about making some sense of it in the present.

I think it sort of disturbs the idea of cause and effect, a linear idea about time, because the potential for everything is always there all the time. And I think that's again, maybe how I experience time differently in terms of being neurodivergent, so time and space is just one big mass. Everything's layered on top of everything else, a bit like the sound maybe. But that's my experience of it anyway, that's how I sense it.





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**EH:** Finally, I suppose, although I could probably go on for hours, we've come full circle back to your practice as a whole. I wondered whether we could touch on the wider context of art made by neurodivergent artists. I know that in our networking communities, many neurodivergent artists very consciously, in communicating their experiences creatively, seek to engender some kind of change or maybe at least some kind of wider awareness. I wondered if that's the same for you, or do you feel that that possible effect of your work is more coincidental? Like, is there anything that you feel like you want your audience to take away from 'Welter,' be it thoughts, feelings, or even ideas about performance art or making art more generally?

**VG:** I think it's probably both things. I've never really felt very comfortable being kind of overly politicised in terms of activism or whatever. I think the ways that I've felt about maybe raising awareness of certain things through art has been a more subtle level. So through the work and not necessarily saying what things are about or even articulating like a certain identity, but I've sensed that that started to change for me. Mainly because I do find the world really difficult and I find it difficult to be in the world as an autistic person and feel that difficulty in communication and realise that actually, part of the reasons for making work for me, at least now, is about not



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necessarily raising awareness in the sense of like making a banner and standing outside a gallery and saying I'm a neurodivergent artist. But just to try and make more work that is by virtue of being made by neurodivergent artists, starts to infiltrate or bring those kinds of works and those kinds of bodies and voices into the art space, but have it be more subtle. That's just my way, I don't have social media. I don't tweet, I don't do any of that stuff. So sometimes it is difficult to have a more overt voice. But I think my tendency is always to do things slowly and subtly over time and then to see, a bit like a performance really, set something in motion and let it go for several hours and then hopefully, it will ingrain and become present. And so I think that that's probably what I was kind of thinking about or aiming for when I was reflecting on having made 'Welter' and then kind of sharing it now four years later, three years / four years after having had my diagnosis.

What's been really great about presenting 'Welter' with Shape is that I feel that I've developed a really honest relationship with you and Jeff and Emily, especially on days when I have not been able to do a call or I've been feeling overwhelmed. And it's been really good because I've been able to start to understand what my specific needs might be. Especially in relation to making work because I never really had the opportunity to think about what those would be or benefit from any of those



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adjustments. Because when you've struggled for years, I never know what to ask for, or at least I felt ashamed to ask those things that I now feel validated in some way to ask for.

For example, being able to present 'Welter' online, at least initially, is great in terms of accessibility because I'm not able to engage with travel or physical spaces at the minute because I'm just too overwhelmed in my system. And I think it's really important to say that because the assumption might be that it was always my intention to make an online work and to make a video, but actually, it's good for people to hear that actually the reason that I made a video and the reason that it exists online is because I spent over 10 years pushing myself to be present physically to the point of burnout and then had to, in order to make work, find other ways of doing something, making something. So it's more a pragmatic, practical choice that I've ended up with the work that I have, rather than it being aesthetic, sort of conscious choice. And I think it's really important then to maybe articulate some of that, maybe the scaffolding around it, the circumstances behind the work. And also having this conversation now, it's been really helpful to have the camera off. We were thinking about what ways we can do this and make it accessible and I'd been explaining because of feeling overwhelmed at the minute, language is not coming as



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easily as it might do. And having the camera off means that I can save energy that I might use on eye contact and physical gestures, and I can close my eyes and I can rock from side to side if I feel anxious, which I do. It's also good to say that. My body trembles a lot. I can sound very calm but there's a real kind of shivering and shimmering happening at the same time that's getting me through it. So you know, I'm doing it right now. I'm closing my eyes. It's helping me to get words out.

I sometimes think there's a gloss to my website or an artists website with a CV, or whatever. But there's a lot that's hiding behind that, at least for me. There's years of going to performance events and basically turning up for my performance and then leaving and not being able to engage with any of the other stuff because I have been completely overwhelmed. Or not being able to do any of the social stuff so having to spend most of my time finding a safe space which is most often standing in the toilets until it's all over and you can leave. And that's the stuff that I think I'm happy to share now because if I'd heard that maybe five or six years ago, I maybe would have felt more comfortable with the things that I felt that I was finding difficult in making artwork. I think being able to figure out some of that has been a real benefit.



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I'd like to think that in time the film could be installed in a gallery space, that was always the intention. If I close my eyes, I imagine it on a continuous loop in a durational space with multiple speakers, really specifically placed and spaced out to really accentuate some of those sounds that we've been talking about and have the work be on multiple screens of different sizes, some on the ceiling, maybe some on the floor, really to accentuate that disjoint of time and space. But physical presence has been a massive barrier for me in the past to the extent that I just stopped making work.

I think those are the things that I'm hoping, aside from getting something from maybe, something of the film resonating with somebody's experience or it being intriguing or whatever. I don't know, maybe this conversation is more of the work, or is the thing that maybe has the most potential to speak about, or at least a different aspect of my experience as a neurodivergent artist, which I think without realising it, you're encouraged to mask a lot, in kind of an art context, but also in society as well. It's very, very difficult to articulate need when there's this illusion of independence, which is an illusion, actually isn't it?



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**EH:** Yeah. Thank you so much, Victoria. Thanks for being so honest and taking us so deeply into your practice and artworks but also everything else as well. I feel like that was a really nourishing conversation for me and I hope it was the same for you. And I'm really excited to continue this journey with you of trying to share 'Welter' with the world and having more conversations about it. So yeah, I agree. I think that this conversation will be very impactful and rich for other people as well. Thank you so much for taking the time!

**VG:** Thank you for giving me an opportunity to feel safe to actually verbalise some of this. I guess another reason for making performance, just to say, is that verbal communication is not my first mode of communication. So this is quite a leap of faith and is a very kind of emerging thing. And this is something that I would like to explore more in my practice as well. So this has been a testament to the process of working with Shape. That I've gotten to this point where actually I can add that layer of articulation to the work, so thank you.