

Imran Perretta in conversation with Jemma Desai

Chisenhale Gallery, 6th February 2020

Emma Moore 00:00

Hi everyone. Hi, good evening. Welcome to Chisenhale gallery. Thank you all very much for joining us for this evening's conversation with Imran Perretta and Jemma Desai. My name is Emma, I'm the curator of Engagement here at Chisenhale, and this evening's conversation takes place in association with Imran's new exhibition, the Disruptors, which are all kind of sitting within and The Destructors was shot not far from the gallery actually, in the Shadwell Centre down the road, and it centres on a group of young men who navigate the social pressures of growing up in a society that has come to view them as both a physical and ideological threat. It's been incredible to work with Imran on this commission over the last couple of years, which feels particularly pertinent in our current climate, and it's had such an amazing response even in the two three weeks since we opened the show, and having loads of amazing conversations with visitors, so really looking forward to seeing how those conversations continue over the course of the show. And also we've got more events programmes, so if you go on our website, all the information on the events is online there. I just like to take this opportunity to thank all of our commission partners and also supporters. The Destructors is produced by Chisenhale Gallery and Spike Island in Bristol, and it's commissioned by Chisenhale Gallery, Spike Island, the Whitworth in Manchester and Baltic in Gateshead, and it opens at Baltic in March and then it goes to the Whitworth in Manchester in May so you can follow it around the country as well. The Disruptors is supported by Outset contemporary art fund and a thank our lead exhibition supporter Shane Ackroyd, and the exhibition has also produced with the support of the Chisenhale Gallery's commission fund with additional support from the Imran Perretta Supporters' Circle. Our talks and event programme is supported by Brian Boylan and forms part of the engagement programme with additional support from the engagement programme's supporter's circle. So before I hand over to Imran and Jemma who will speak for around 45 minutes or so, and then we will have time for questions and comments from the audience. And we've got two roving mics which will be kind of passed around. We are recording this evening's talk. So I would ask you to wait for the mic to ask your question. But just to offer a brief bio by way of introduction for Imran and Jemma. So, Imran lives and works in London and through his work he explores state power, Biopolitics and marginality. Recent exhibitions include The Destructors which opened at Spike Island in Bristol last year, and All His Ghosts Must Do My Bidding at Wysing Art Centre in Cambridge, also last year, and 15 days at Jerwood Space London as a recipient of the Jerwood FVU awards in 2018. Imran was selected for Bloomberg New Contemporaries in 2014/15 and was nominated for the Film London Jarman award last year as well. Jemma Desai is a writer, researcher and programmer based in London. Previously, Jemma has worked at the BFI British Council, an International Film Office. Jemma is currently working on a research project around the relationship between representation and Praxis in public programming. Thank you all again for being here. Thank you both. And I will now hand over to Imran and Jemma.

Jemma Desai 03:04

Thank you Emma.

Imran Perretta 03:05

Thanks Emma.

Jemma Desai 03:07

Can everyone - can everyone hear us, are the mics working? Okay, good. Too quiet?

Imran Perretta 03:20

Okay, what about me? Too loud? too loud. Alright, I'll pipe down.

Jemma Desai 03:27

So, welcome to the Imran and Jemma show. So, you know, you just heard those bios, and they were what they are. But we're here mostly today, because we've kind of been in dialogue together about various things happening in our lives. And we're thinking about a lot about embodiment and care, and how we're thinking that through like, in our lives right now and how it's kind of pushing up against things outside of us, like work, relationships, politics. So we don't want to replicate conversations like you've got in the Exhibition Guide, which is really like a wonderful like, kind of exploration of the Commission and the context in which the commission was made. But we kind of want to build on thoughts from that and how they intersect with some of the conversations we've been having between us and, and some feelings that I'm having at the moment in response to the work. Before we begin, we just want to say something about embodiment and care and space that you're in today. And while we say we want to invite you to close your eyes, and take a breath, so that we can arrive here together and get used to being comfortable in the space we have and also with the silence, the pauses, the thoughtfulness that might follow, the sentences that might trail off, the things that might be left unsaid. We'd love for you to enter a space of listening. We're inviting you to do this because we think just so often that we forget in these spaces that what we are listening to is intimacy when we hear an artist speak about their work, and when we hear people respond with feeling to it. Recently, when I showed a programme of Alia Syed's films the other week, when introducing she asked the audience to care for the work as they watched. She said something like, "you might not understand me or what I'm trying to say, or what I'm trying to feel, but you can still care for me." It's an intention we've been thinking about a lot, and it's an intention I hope we can bring here tonight.

Imran Perretta 05:43

And whilst you've all got your eyes closed, I wanted to acknowledge the land that we stand on.

Imran Perretta 05:50

I wanted to acknowledge this land, its people, its history, and its precarious future. I want to acknowledge that the room we are sitting in sits in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. A borough

that is home to the largest British Bangladeshi community in the UK. I want to acknowledge that the British Bangladeshi community makes up over 60% of the borough's overall demographic. I want to acknowledge that the fastest growing demographic in the borough of Tower Hamlets is white European. I want to acknowledge that the fastest declining demographic in the borough of Tower Hamlets is British Bangladeshi. I want to acknowledge that I am the first and only British Bangladeshi artist to have a solo exhibition in this space. I want to acknowledge that I am both a British Bangladeshi and a Londoner, and though I have lived here, I'm not from here. I want to acknowledge that as recently as the early 70s 90% of the housing stock in London in the London Borough Tower Hamlets was state owned. I want to acknowledge that at the time of writing. The average house price in the borough is now 538,469 pounds. I want to acknowledge that as a cultural worker. My deepest fear is that I am complicit in exacerbating the precarious conditions for the British Bangladeshi community in Tower Hamlets. Though I myself am British Bangladeshi and precarious. I want to acknowledge that the land I'm currently occupying is not mine to claim, though I feel that for better or worse it has laid claim to me. I want to acknowledge again that I am the first and only British Bangladeshi artist to have a solo exhibition within these walls, and I hope beyond hope that I will not be the last.

Jemma Desai 07:46

You can come back into the room and join us. Thank you Imran for the land acknowledgement. Do you want to talk a little bit about the context in which you wanted to deliver that and why you chose to do that?

Imran Perretta 08:03

Well, it actually comes off the back of a book that you recommended, which is, 'Before I was a Critic I was a Human Being' by Amy Fung. And I'm not gonna lie, I'm halfway through the intro. But still, it brought to me this, I guess, tradition in Canada that I hadn't known about before, which is this idea of land acknowledgement. And what it is, is a kind of tokenistic reparative gesture that I guess like white Canadians use to kind of acknowledge in some way that they're standing on Indigenous land. And, you know, like I said, it's kind of, I think it's an interesting notion. But of course, it only goes part of the way. And I just felt like, the land that we're standing on is important, and it's loaded historically, culturally and whatever else and that, though I am presenting something here, I'm also in one way or another an interloper, a stranger. Again, though, I have no claim to the space, I feel as though it's kind of weirdly claimed me. So I just wanted to start, I guess by kind of like, yeah, acknowledging the lands that we're all sitting in today, and to acknowledge that this is not a neutral space. This is a space that is layered and multifarious, and we should acknowledge that.

Jemma Desai 09:27

And I think we're going to talk about that a bit more in a bit later. But I kind of wanted to start a little bit with this idea of interloping. And I was thinking a little bit about that. In the way that I experienced the film, actually, because I feel like even though I felt such resonance with it, I also felt that I was an interloper in the in the space when I was watching the film. And I just wanted to share how I

experienced it, and how it made me think about structure in the space of a gallery, because I kind of sat here, It was very cold. And I sat and watched it like three times, like in a loop. And so to me in a way, like the end became the beginning, and it became the beginning and the end, kind of like a circle. And I think the reason why I experienced it in that way was because of some of the conversations we've been having about my daughter, Leena, and how I felt she was kind of seen in relation to me. And how about we'd been talking about, like corporality, and, and how those subjectivities like, come into focus in different ways when they put pushed up against, like other sections of the film as well. And I was thinking about these, like, tender descriptions of care in the third act, [muffled sound caused by microphone moving] sorry, that was me, and how they sit within the structures of the state and racism, but how they also refuse them and like, rub up against them. And, I guess, like how those thoughts that entered my mind, like, really rubbed against the simplicity of just the care of another human, which you described so beautifully. And I wondered if you could talk a little bit about structure and what you were thinking, and how it works in this space for you. If you think it changes, depending on how it's shown, and if you'd thought about that, when you made it.

Imran Perretta 11:23

Yeah, I mean, I guess in a sense, like, the narrative, kind of like, the chronology of the monologues is sort of like, is off, it's not kind of linear in that sense. But I think the sort of, you know, there's an easy way of kind of talking about in relation to like structural oppression or whatever is like giving yourself some kind of like structural basis to create a visual language is in some way, like a nod to those conditions, and like critiquing them a little bit, but I think for me, it's a lot about the way that my brain works and trying to kind of, you know, like, come to terms with like, very sort of difficult and multilayered, dissonant emotions and experiences, and trying to find a way to express them. And so, you know, they're setting structures, whether they're, you know, whether they're sort of writing a very formal poem that then becomes the script for this work, or, you know, using two screens in a very particular way, is kind of like an arithmetical way of trying to work my way through things that actually exist outside of structure. They're not rational, they're kind of, they're inherently difficult to come to terms with. And so I guess making art about it in quite a structured way, or beginning to sort of like create an architecture and on which a sort of visual language and a written language can hang is the only way of me being able to process all of this mad stuff that's happened. So in that sense, like structure is super important. And I think actually, yeah, I think I think you're mad for watching it three times in a row.

Jemma Desai 13:07

[laughs]

Imran Perretta 13:07

But because like I, you know, I've was the only person that's done that, you know, doing the edit, and all that. But I think, in a lot of other things that I've done, the loop has become, you know, the fact that all the videos somehow become interpolated back into themselves, because they're constantly looping, this, to me, is the most linear sort of thing I've done. And in that sense, the kind of structure of the intro

and the end and all this kind of thing is quite important, because the final moment is, is love falling backwards off the chair. And that's in a lot of ways, the most conventional ending I've ever sort of done. So. But there was a sort of circularity still within it. I hope that kind of meant that though there's like a beginning and an end, there's something there, were like internal cycles, internal polyrhythms within the work. So there are sort of loops within the work, if that makes sense.

Jemma Desai 14:00

Yeah. And so given that, because I'm sort of interested in the fact that it's also going around festivals at the moment and being shown in like a cinema space. And obviously, it's a very specific set up here that is very embodied. And I wonder what you think, whether it's two different pieces of work? How do you feel about its life in these different contexts?

Imran Perretta 14:27

Yeah, it doesn't work at a film festival. You know, because I think, it's a different ask of an audience when you're, I mean, I know it's cold in here and all that, but somehow, you somehow were complicit in the spectacle of the artwork, and we kind of understand the conditions a little bit. You know, the chairs being part of the install, and all this kind of stuff. And when it's in a screening environment, it's kind of, it dies somehow. You know, don't get me wrong, it's free trips, you know, I mean, like, I'm not against it, but I think it's like, it somehow has some of the... Also, because there's things that happen necessarily, when you're shown as part of like a show reel, for example, that the sound gets normalised with all the other sounds. So all of a sudden, it becomes less dynamic. And you know, it's not as loud and as effective and all this stuff. So it kind of like, it's not able to claim the space in the same way. And so I think, in that sense, this work is specific. And I kind of know that now. And I think if I was going to make something for like a festival, again, it would be much more like narrative or single screen, you know, I mean, with like a much more, to get geeky about it, like a much more conventional mix down on the sound and all this kind of stuff, so that it's able to sort of occupy that space in a more, comfortable way? But then, there's also something I guess, quite interesting about the discomfort of it as well. And people who are at film festivals expecting a certain experience, and then kind of coming away with having watched this, and there's two screens that they've got to keep their eyes on at the same time. And so that's kind of been, it's all productive. Do you know what I mean, it's all productive. But I think this is the sort of ideal setting because like you said, it is the embodied way to encounter the work. So yeah.

Jemma Desai 16:13

One of the things that you're thinking through, in the way that you're presenting the work with the two screens, is this idea of visibility and invisibility. And I've been thinking a lot about that recently, I've been thinking about it as this really insidious part of racism, the fact that you're not in control of your visibility, and someone else decides how visible or invisible you become. And it feels like something that on all, all levels of marginalisation, there's that there is a version of that, like, whatever strap strata of society, you belong to how much privilege, you gain, that visibility. And Invisibility is like a very key part of the way that racism functions. The film feels like a bit of a like, refusal, and reclamation of that. And I just

wondered if you could talk us through your strategies around that, because there was something about care in there, which was really tangible. And in all of the elements of the film, actually.

Imran Perretta 17:22

Yeah, I think, for me, it's about you know, that, again, there's like, sort of formal concerns around like, how do you sort of create a visual language that references the surveillance state without perpetuating it, and for me, that was like the multiple camera angles and the multiple screens. But I think as well, it was about, again, when it's what you're saying, you know, when you're in this position, where you're forcibly made visible or invisible, depending on the different state agencies you encounter, or wherever you're watching something on Netflix, whatever it is, you know, all these different representational avenues that people are sort of, again, like you were forcibly or accidentally made visible. For me, the only way of...sort of reclaiming any agency against that backdrop was to be hyper intentional about every angle and about how it would in some way obscure someone's selfhood, so that they could speak their truth. And could, you know, emote and talk about care and talk about oppression, and it's, you know, experiences that have in one way or another been formative, for better or worse, whilst, at the same time being able to maintain some sense of their dignity. So at some measure of dignity in in, in sort of, I guess, these testimonials, and the only way I could see to do that was to crop people's faces, and to kind of like, find a way to not ever give the whole game away because again, this thing of visibility is like sacred, it has to be sacred when the state is making forcibly making you visible, and acting violently in lieu of that visibility. So it was a lot about that about, you know, how you look at the history of cinema and everything else as well, and like, you know, this is a gift from I guess, like a lot of African American writers, is conversations around visibility in Hollywood, and, you know, it's been such a gift to talk through or read through stuff written by Arthur Jafar. And, and like, Bradford Young and people who were like working as for example, cinematographers right now, talking in a beautiful and eloquent way, not just about I guess, the visual regimes within cinema, but like the physical apparatus of it as well and like what it means to wield a camera, like how do you do that responsibly when it's been the sort of the most potent tool of oppression in terms of, it's the most potent representational tool that we have, and it has been wielded in the most violent way. You know, [Paul] Virilio, talks about, (it's on the reading list), but he talks about the camera as a weapon and that's always stuck with me. So it's like, well, I'm the one wielding the camera. So how can I kind of like, use this kind of surgical tool for visibility to both comment on and critique its potential for violence, but also use it as a way of, I guess, providing anonymity and dignity, which is, you know, those are both acts of care. So that's the sort of impetus behind it really. And it's a lot to do with, again, like one particular essay that I read, is it an essay? I guess it's an essay, like a small text by Arthur Jafar called 'Black Visual Intonation', which is, and this is kind of something that maybe references what I was saying earlier about the internal loops in the film, excuse me, but it's about the idea that to move away from from the Hollywood canon, African American filmmakers could maybe think about constructing a visual language that is based around Jazz, or around, you know, I'm gonna butcher the quote, but like, the sort of like, the beautiful alienation of Black music is what is what he says. And so I've always sort of thought, you know, what would a Brown visual intonation be like, how, in a surveillance state, how can we sort of co-opt tools that have

been used to not only marginalise, but very physically, be violent towards us, and like, create like a Brown visual language? That again, maybe the reference is not necessarily music, though, it always is for me, but like underneath it all. But it's like maybe something that's non-western, it's maybe something that's like to do with, again, polyrhythm, like non-western time signatures, all this stuff, like the way that I edit is like, I try and have in my mind, like, unusual time signatures, because it's all very rhythmic, right? So I'm maybe going off on one little bit, but the point being is that it's like trying to create a visual and sonic language that, in some way, tries to undo the things that we've taken for granted in the way that the cinematic image is normally constructed. Because it has been constructed violently. Yeah. And so it's like, knowing that that's the case, we can't get rid of that canon of imagery from our heads, but how can we maybe subvert it? And so for me, it's kind of like re after all, my work is sort of after Arthur Jafa in that sense, and that particular thought experiment of his because it's been like, that's the task. This also goes back to the conversation about structures, like this is the structure I need to build for myself, is this a visual intonation that, in some way, tries to undo some of the norms of what it is to be made visible by the tools of cinema.

Jemma Desai 22:30

And I'm really glad that you've started talking about sound because there's something you know, that the idea about dissonance in the sound and the real avocation and the sound of the cognitive dissonance that that you live live in when you know that your what you're being told, is rooted in an untruth or an injustice. You know, like that sunken place, feeling that just the idea that something's off or not safe, and, and I guess, some of the stuff that you were saying just now is really interesting, because it's, it's slightly different. So what you're talking about is in the visual strategies, because you're actually validating rather than on doing that, that feeling, right, you're not using that feeling, you're evoking it. But at the same time, like, I feel like that feeling would land differently in different bodies, like, and I wondered how you thought about that, when you were doing that score and what you were thinking about?

Imran Perretta 23:32

Yeah, I mean, I'm just an anxious guy, innit. So like, it's always going to come out sounding a bit, you know, like that.

Imran Perretta 23:40

I think, for me, it's about, you know, because for all the dissonance in the soundtrack, there's also moments, there's also melodic moments and moments of like, more consonants in the soundtrack. And, you know, that if like two thirds of its major and a major scale, like some of its in the minor scale, and there's something about like, light and shade, and kind of like, having a complexity where it's in the sound where it's not just constantly just going down through the floor, you know, this depressing thing. But I think it is about kind of, for me, it's just all about acknowledging the complexity of the situation, the complexity of the visibility of the complexity of that dissonant psychological state that you're talking about. It couldn't have been like just a happy or a sad score. It had to be, it had to do lots of things, you

know, it had to be happy and sad. It had to be like lamentful and also in some places like joyous, you know. And I think that's what sound is able to do so brilliantly, is you know, you can kind of, the way that you construct a chord or whatever is that you can add you know, colouration, I guess, to the chord to give it a totally different feeling. And there's something so embodied about sound. So for me, it's like, actually, along with the right in a way, the thing that's in third place is the visual sometimes and the things that really build it for me are the writing and the sound, because they kind of, that's the content and the tone. And the visuals are sort of like I guess the information, the data, so to speak. So the sound for me is like, you know, there's a lot of things that I do that I learned from like listening to horror soundtracks and stuff like that, you know, and war soundtracks, that's the main one. So one of the things that I use a lot is this thing called a Shepard tone, which is like, and it's like an endlessly descending or ascending tone. Which kind of, it's in loads of Hans Zimmer soundtracks, and stuff like that. It's like, you know, every time Batman revs up a motorbike, you just hear this, like endlessly rising, like "eeeerr", that kind of thing. So and it's used a lot in war when they're trying to build suspense. But what I'm interested in is, is the idea that the suspense never resolves itself, that like, you know, the amazing thing about this Shepard tone is that, you know, it never finishes, right. It's all, it will, it will, always on forever, unnecessarily, infinitely, continue rising. And it's all it is, is an illusion, psycho, psycho acoustic illusion. But I just found that so compelling. You know, and the fact that it's used in more soundtracks, and I'm kind of talking about this endless war, you know, the war on terror. So it seems so like kind of apposite in that sense, but also are sort of interested in what happens when you put like a major chord over the top of it, how does that change it? And the answer is, it does really interesting things, I can't quantify them, because my music theory is not good enough. But it's like, it just sounds interesting, that there's something unexpected happening there. And I think that was enough for me, because like I say, all the time, but the only thing that art really is good for is taking something that's infinitely complex, and somehow making it more complex. It's not about trying in any way to resolve, you know, to have a set of bullet points that you can kind of take away from this thing, is much more about trying to kind of like, add layer upon layer, more, to how it is we're experiencing this thing in the world, whatever this thing is, this experience, and in this case, is a very specific one, you know, it's this sort of adolescence as like, I guess, like a Brown man post 9/11. But, you know, that is so infinitely complex, I'm still coming to terms with it now. So the sound couldn't do anything other than be weird, and kind of unresolved as well. Do you know what I mean?

Jemma Desai 27:16

Yeah...I'm just thinking as well about, like, how that connects to what you were saying about this kind of like Brown visual language. And, and I was just trying to understand, when I was like, listening to it, whether another person with another set of memories would, would just feel something really quite different. And, were you thinking in that specific way, when you would, when you're making it, about, you know, because you've talked about this being a really embodied piece of work, you're like, speaking from your body, but it's not just going to be received by bodies like yours. And that evocation, and the kinds of sounds that you use at times when actually you're quite vulnerable and exposed, and people

that you love are as well. And I wondered if you'd thought a little bit about strategies of protection or distancing, or whether you just really spoke from your body and didn't think about that.

Imran Perretta 28:18

I mean, you always sort of think about it, you know, because I mean, you know, this is also part of acknowledging the land at the beginning of this talk is that we're, you know, this work is situated in a landscape, a problematic one, you know, but also one where there are positives too, so I think, but I would go back to sort of the visceral quality of sound, because I think, you know, I'm sort of writing in a very obtuse poetic way, in a lot of senses, like, through a lot of experiences that not everyone has had. And in that sense, it's highly, highly subjective. But the one thing we all feel is how, you know, a subwoofer can sort of kick you in the stomach, or, you know, a high pitched violin sound can get you in the back of your jaw, you know, there are these sort of sonic experiences that are universal? You know, I guess they're kind of, in some way they're like preternatural. They're like, they affect you before your brains had time to really process what's going on. And I'm drawn to that, too. So there's all these things that have been thought about and felt but then there's also these things that feel like so visceral, and they feel like they emerge from within, I think that's why I really talk a lot about bass, because it does feel like it's emanating from within, you know, because it's sort of like omnidirectional, so it just feels like it's coming from your belly rather than from the speakers. And that's always been, you know, growing up raving and everything else, that was just such an intoxicating feeling. And so for me, it's like wielding that in a way to kind of like tell or complicate a narrative is like, so exciting. And I'm hoping that's the way that it may be speaks outside of its subject matter, is some of the formal qualities in all of it, you know, in all of it, but particularly the sound.

Jemma Desai 30:02

Yeah. You've started talking a little bit about layering, like the different elements of the film and how they were, they were working. And I was thinking about these different elements as like kind of, like body parts in dialogue, and movement, like all coming into this really embodied piece. And thinking about like dialogue within that piece. So there's no like conventional dialogue, there aren't two people talking to one another. But there's dialogue between the first person delivery through the voice of an actor, like your first person delivery through the voice of an actor, but also through the work you did in the production phase, with young people in the area, and I just wondered if you could talk a little bit about what that work, and how those conversations like, live in the work?

Imran Perretta 30:55

Sure, yeah. I think I think there's always like, there's a sense that when you do workshops related to artworks, or whatever, that there's this kind of like harvesting of, you know, local...local issues, local minds, local talent, whatever. And I was very conscious of that, that I just didn't want to do that. You know, and I think it's easy to sort of almost do it by accident. So the impetus behind the workshops was, in a way that it's just like diverting public money, it was like we've got some money to do some workshops, let's just do it. It doesn't have to be part of the thing. We can just use it to do some good

stuff. And so, we just had some roundtables, like I want to shout out Nurull, I don't know if he's here, but Nurull Islam, who runs the Mile End Community Project. And also Riz Hussain who runs Jawaab, which is a social justice organisation. We kind of came together and chatted to some local Mile End lads. And just like, we're just shooting the breeze, playing Playstation, like eating pizza, or whatever. And just basically just talking very plainly about some of the things we've all seen and heard. And I think the purpose of it was, it was plainly just to make space, you know, just to have like, just to have a little bit of money, to have a little bit of time, to just compare notes, because it doesn't happen in real life, you know, you don't get that opportunity. And it was totally instrumental in the work in so far as I hadn't started writing by that stage. And I hadn't known what, I didn't know what I was going to write about. I didn't know there was a treatment and all this stuff that you've got to do, but I didn't really know what the narrative was, I had no sense of it. And through those conversations, I came to understand the stories of my own that were, because I've got millions of stories, man, we've all got millions innit, you know, it's like, yeah, I can't stress enough, this is three stories out of about fucking a trillion, you know what I mean, and so, for me, these three, the conversations, we had these three stories from my past, from my adolescence, from my, like, young adult years, were the ones that somehow felt the most poignant and that were, where they added up to more than the sum of their parts, is that the saying, more than the sum of their parts? that they would, you know, they in and of themselves are meaningful, but together, they showed just how complex and how fractured this adolescence was. And that so much came from just like being in strength and solidarity, in a room for like four hours on a Tuesday night. Just being able to just chat through it with nothing on the line, no stakes, no recorders, none of that, you know, no cultural capital to be had, just self reflection. Yeah, you know, amongst the group. And in that sense, it was like, it was valuable to this, but to life generally, you know, I kind of, it made me realise how much those conversations are internal monologues, and that they should be had, well, definitely not like this, but you know, with a comfy sofa, and, you know, some food and, you know, I guess, like willing souls who are willing to kind of be vulnerable, whatever. So, yeah.

Jemma Desai 34:04

I've been thinking a lot about that, actually. Because I've been doing loads of interviews for like, my research as well. And, like really thinking hard about what happens when you put down a recorder...

Imran Perretta 34:15

changes everything.

Jemma Desai 34:16

And also, I had like this one conversation this weekend with a group of people and it was really emotional. And then the next day, I lost like two hours of the recording, and just thinking really, about how that didn't matter. Because, yeah, like you said, it kind of was layered on top of a story that I already knew. And as, y'know when that happened, I was actually thinking about this work, about how there's stories that live in our bodies, but through sharing them, like even just through air, you know,

they help us sort of route our own. Yeah. And kind of that actually, those conversations sound like they were quite an embodied practice for you to then write with?

Imran Perretta 35:00

100%, yeah. But I think, you know, this is part of any form of like narrative creative practice is like, invariably the thing that people see a narrative is themselves, you know, or maybe they don't see themselves, and therefore they see themselves, if that makes sense. You know, it's a dissonant experience, and therefore, you come to know something of yourself in relief of this narrative. And so, yeah, I think the scary thing is hearing what people have been through in their real life that, you know, that's the thing that's very sobering about it all, is like, you know, there's, people have seen some gnarly shit, man, and like, it ain't just me. And that's the thing that was intoxicating, was like, oh, yeah, it's not just, you know, and kind of comparing stories that were eerily similar. You know, like, the part one of this film, I forgive you for the bonds, you know, chatting to one of the boys, and they're like, yeah, no, I've had something like that, too. You know, this, this sort of this clemency from a random, like, I'm choosing to forgive you for all your ills of which I know nothing about you, and you know, I don't need to fucking explain it. But, you know, so and you sort of, in my mind, that was such a bizarre and kind of mind melting experience to know that someone else had it in like, quite a similar context, on like public transport, all this kind of stuff is like, you know, that conversation wasn't actually from the workshops, but it's subsequent conversations with other friends. And it's like, right, okay, so I'm, you know, this is, this is a thing, right? This is a thing. And it's the thingness. You know, that's a really important, really important sort of thing, because I think you kind of there's a camaraderie or solidarity there, once you once you can see each other, you know, and what, you know, the kind of, all of the mad stuff that we've we've all sort of been through, I'm not trying to get the violins out, I'm just saying it's like, you know, there's just so much to talk about, and you forget how much there is to talk about when you're not able to just be in a communal space in a collective space with people who have seen some of the same things as you. And it's very freeing, you know.

Jemma Desai 36:59

And what you're saying is, is something that is really routed to actual physical spaces as well. And that's something that you explore in the work as well. And like, watching, it just made me think about how the writing is in dialogue with the place and space of the locations, but it's also, it enacts this fundamental need that we have, especially as marginalised people, or racialized people or precarious individuals to like, gather and enact kinship, just like you've described, and find out, just find our people, especially if like home, or the space between home and that space is like a very contested space. And you evoke, evoke a real threat to those spaces in the work, through some of your strategies. Could you talk a little bit about what you were doing? What you're thinking about specifically in like, the locations that you're about as well, and how those strategies helped you to explore it.

Imran Perretta 38:07

Yeah, I mean, so the film is shot, so this is shot here, the freeze frames we've got up now. This was in the gym at the Shadwell centre. So the whole film was shot in three or four different rooms in the Shadwell centre. And for those that don't know what it is, it's a community centre basically. But in its history has been a lot of things. You know, it was a primary school, it's a place for local people to get counselling, you can get housing support there, it's a hub basically, it's a community hub, and it's kind of all things to all people. But as with so many community spaces that are all things to all people, they get slowly getting swallowed up under austerity. And I think the Shadwell centre is a real prime example of that, because you know, it's one of the spaces that is, it's not purpose built in the way that a lot of purpose built spaces were say like in the 90s. And they were purposefully small and sort of pokey and underfunded, you know from the get-go. The Shadwell centre's quite a grand old Victorian building, I think it's Victorian anyway. But, you know, Tower Hamlets council had their budget cut by 60%. So they were trying to give the same social care provision for 40% of the budget that they had before, something like that, anyway, maybe it's 50%. But you know, they're doing it for less than half I think. And so invariably, when you pump money towards all of the kind of stuff you have to do in the trenches, the day to day stuff, like helping people with debt or, you know, counselling them or teaching them or you know, doing yoga lessons for elderly people, or wherever it is, the building starts to crumble because there's no money left to maintain it and when the building starts to crumble, the facilities are no longer fit for purpose. And that's just it's this slow decline into it basically being knocked down and for sort of affordable housing to be put up, quote unquote affordable. So it's, it's kind of, you know, in the work, there's all these sort of unexplained liquids and gases kind of making their way into the building. And, you know, in a way, it's like, I guess, in some senses is a little bit of a heavy handed metaphor about outside forces sort of making their way in, but it's also a lot to do with trying to draw attention to the fact that the building is falling to bits, you know, it's kind of, its operational, and that's because the people that work there are frickin incredible, they're, like, amazing, dedicated, and incredibly friendly, and patient and all that for all of the nonsense we put them through trying to film there. And, like, it's an amazing space, but you can see that it is slowly, slowly decaying. And it is this asset to the community, you know, people do English lessons, that they do cooking lessons, sewing lessons, art lessons, all this kind of stuff, you know, and, you know, being a creative practitioner in a place where, you know, the arts are used as, as, as really a way of enacting like state sponsored care, to see that stuff being cut. And for the building to be falling apart in a way that it is, was really like, hard to stomach. And so the building for me, like the building had to become very present, it had to be a protagonist, you know, it had to be a person. And it had to be a person that was ailing, you know, a person that was tired and ill and that wasn't being cared for in the same way that actually, the boys, though they weren't being cared for by the outside world, they were at least able to care for themselves, you know, they're able to catch it, what do you think they catch each other, I'm not given that one way. But, you know, they're kind of like, navigate this minefield. And whatever else, they're kind of enacting this care, but the building is falling apart around them, you know. So it's like, even if they're able to sort of kind of have this radical practice of being collective and being embodied together, the place that they are there to do it in, is also crumbling around them. So they have no, there's a line in the, in the film, where it's like, and we're here, because there's nowhere else we can be. And it's like, once that last place goes, there really will be

nowhere else they can be. And that's a very scary prospect, especially now we've got another five years of Tory rule. You know, no matter what they say, austerity is not over. And these public spaces will continue to fall. And for the people that need them, it's like a, it's just blow after blow. Does that mean? So I think the building is, is for me, is very sobering to think about what might happen to it in like, 10,15 years time. You know, because in the sense in the borough is, like one of the last places standing, and I mean, we're walking in there, and the place is like, you know, there's paint coming off the walls, you know, carpet peeling up, left, right, you know, it's in a state, and there's no one to look after it. And that's a very sad, sad situation. So yeah.

Jemma Desai 42:56

It's you know, you kind of sort of said, really flippantly like, that this metaphor was heavy handed in some way. But actually, what was really evocative for me was like, how it evokes this sort of invisible noxious element of austerity, to personal relationships, and how they put them under such incredible stress. And how obviously, the building is like part of it, but it's also just in the air and how it gets between, like, I thought that those viscous, like, materials that entered that building, were things that get in the way of us breathing the same air, and navigating the same space and getting words out of our mouths, you know, all of those things. So it just worked on so many different registers around kinship, that weren't just like physical decay, it was also about...Yeah, that you need those spaces to work and you have equal share of them in order for us to enact that kinship, actually.

Imran Perretta 44:10

Yeah, that's beautiful. Thank you. Yeah, that sounds great. [laughs].

Jemma Desai 44:12

No, it's really from your work.

Imran Perretta 44:15

I think one thing I wanted to pick up on was this idea of austerity and how it affects relationships. Because I think this really is like at the heart of, I guess, what I'm trying to do is to try, to try and give people an insight if they don't have it, because some of us do, right? How is an insight into how the state basically ferments social relations, how, state legislation, though you may think it's something that doesn't apply to you, is, it breaks up families you know, we're, you know, there was a deputation flight to Jamaica this week based on the hostile environment bullshit. You know, I can go on Ad nauseam about how the Prevent strategy has, in criminalising an entire community, it's broken up families, you know, people who were sent, who are detained for various reasons, you know what happens to their children, you know, there's all these ways in which state actors and members of the public are sort of alienated from each other. But actually what the, you know, state, I guess state intervention is something that reverberates not just in things that we hear about on the news, but it really is something that affects people in so many intimate, intimate and personal ways. And like, the best example is the third act of this talking about my mom, and how basically, it was austerity and the cuts to NHS funding for disability

benefits and everything else. That meant that she could no longer move around the house on her own. And there were bits, you know, in the same way, as the Shadwell centre, there's bits falling off the walls, still, to this day in the house I grew up in Streatham, there's still handles just hanging off the wall, because the contract was cancelled halfway through the work. So, you know, we were meant to have a stair lift and all kinds of stuff. And it was cancelled. And so, you know, the way in which something like austerity is seen as this metapolitical, ideological narrative, no one ever really talks about how it affects people on a day to day, and actually that is where it's at its most violent, not when it's ideological, but when it's practical, when it is part of your day to day life, when it means that you cannot function normally, you cannot go about doing your job or your education or wherever it is, in a safe and sort of sacred boundaried way, because the state has decreed that you're not worthy of their funding. And, you know, there's a lot of people that have never had first hand experience of that. So austerity is just this ideological thing to rail against. And whilst that's great, it's like, being intellectually offended by it is not enough, when you felt it is something else, this can be a death sentence. And I, you know, I really am keen to aim upwards in that sense, at the state because the state changes lives, you know, the democratic process is one that is has an indelible effect on so many families, particularly those at the bottom, you know, of the sort of social, socio-economic hierarchy. And, you know, my family's kind of somewhere in the middle, right, but like, even then, austerity kind of had this effect of stripping someone who was ill of their dignity, and that was a very tangible and fucked up thing. And it wasn't, it wasn't this sort of ephemeral bit of state legislation, it was something that was fucking concretely real in my house, man, this shit hanging off the walls, like I said, so, for me, you know, this, this was the way of being able to kind of talk about that and relate that where like you, I think, you may or may not have seen, felt or heard these very exact, specific forms of alienation. But at least I hope there's a shared narrative in seeing how, if any, one of us is oppressed, and we're all oppressed, you know, if, if any one of us is in a position of being structurally divested from by a government that we did or did not vote in, then we're all being defunded, you know, whether or not you feel it really, really on a day to day in your pocket, or you don't, there will be people that you know, and that you love, and that you hold dear that will. And so, you know, to be trite, we're like, we're kind of not all in it together, but also, we're sort of all in it together. Do you know what I mean, and being hyper specific is the way to flesh, put flesh on the bones of these, these political metanarratives that just sort of hang over us like this cloud, like this gas that you're talking about, you know, it each body inhales it and in their own way, and is affected by it in their own way. You know.

Jemma Desai 48:44

I think one of the most powerful things about the sort of the double edge thing about this is like, so on the one hand, you're kind of talking about this really specific and insidious way that the state stopped care for, for someone that needed it. But it also leaves people that care in that way that you describe so beautifully through love, and physical affection. And I guess like when you talked about Prevent, I think in the interview, you're talking about, like teachers and the care that they give to children, but this legislation actually makes you quite helpless in those day to day interactions of care that we might enact because, yeah, it disempowers you in the face of it, you can't do everything that you wish that you know,

you know, that that person needs. And I thought that was a really, it's kind of, that's, it's like both the hopeful part of it, but there's also something quite structurally difficult to overcome. And I kind of wanted to think about that. How much you think about that last section as hopeful and how much you are thinking in a hopeful way right now, with that double bind going on, when we do have, you know, like, obviously, just before the show opened, there was this moment of huge hope for us all and like in this area and I definitely went into Christmas feeling really fucking terrible, you know, but at the centre of this piece is, is real love and care and, and so I wondered how you're thinking about that and how that might have changed through the life of the piece?

Imran Perretta 50:32

Yeah, I mean, you know, like, it's, it's hard to, it's hard to find hope, like, let's be real, you have to dig very deep, but it is there, you know, I think because I mean fucking hell, what else is there, man? Jeez, you know, we have to sort of find it somewhere. I think, you know, we're social creatures, you know, and I was reading about like Ubuntu the other day, like, I am because you are, you know, this idea that we're contingent souls that we're, you know, my existence is based on yours. You know, that's such a beautiful notion. And though it can obviously be leveraged and co-opted for like imperialistic, fucked up oppressive means, actually, at the core of that is something super beautiful. And I think I want to, you know, my limited energy, my limited time on this earth, I want to, like, put it towards that, you know, towards kind of like building something new. Building something better, I think, and, you know, building something hopeful that is, that doesn't centre individuals, you know, I mean, this is basically just me at the beginning of an anti-capitalist rant, which I'm not going to do, but I think it's like, you know, if we can begin to conceive of like, Ubuntu is like, the sort of modus operandi in everything that we do, I am because you are. That strikes me as, like an incredibly liberating way of navigating the world that we're currently in, like this very specific moment that we're in now with, like, you know, the environmental apocalypse is here, man, it's like happening, you know, and then there's so much to contend with, but actually, to be able to boil it down into something manageable, like yes, I am, I am here because you are, and I am here for you, you are here for me. That strikes me as like a very powerful thing. The minute I try and have to think about like, anything more complicated than that, it's like just brain meltdown straightaway. So I'm just going to stick with that for now.

Jemma Desai 52:23

[Laughs]

Imran Perretta 52:24

But you know, I do, I very much believe in collective care. I seen it in my own family, you know, when, like I said, when the state didn't no longer felt they could support us in an individualised way. The family rallied round people flew over from places you know, like, because I'm half Italian. So I've got Italian family coming from Lewisham - I say flew over they got the bus - I've got Italian family in Lewisham, my Bangladeshi family is round the corner...

Imran Perretta 52:52

Yeah, exactly. That's right. So you know, the family rallied round, and we kind of...we all got on our hands and knees, and we did what needed to be done. We cared for each other, we cared for my Mum, we continue to do that to this day, and I'm a family man, sort of famously so. I don't like to go out much, but it's kind of something that I think I want to make sure to reverberate personally, in everything I encounter now is to believe the best about people until they give me a reason to prove otherwise. And to understand that, you know, I think the art world is very much about centering people, and solo geniuses and all this kind of shit. And it's like, I mean, maybe this doesn't do much to dismantle that idea. But I think, you know, if we can conceive of each other as contingent beings in this world that we're sort of, we are individuals, but in a complex web of interdependency, then that's, that's like, what more do you need, man? That's hope, that's beautiful.

Jemma Desai 53:02

Lewisham Airport...

Jemma Desai 53:49

Yeah, and I'm gonna, I am going to open it up to the audience, don't worry. I just wanted to say one more thing, just that thing that you've said before about the honour, that is, like the act of caring, and thinking, really thinking, that like in like, our discussions that we've had, like, just thinking about, yeah, what caring for a child or caring for a parent or any family allows you to enact and in our society right now, we think of it as a really like, nuclear family like type of vibe like that. It doesn't teach you anything about the society, the society that you live in, that you should all just shut yourselves in your house and only care for what you have. But there's this really beautiful lesson in those moments of care about what we can enact, like wider than that. And actually right now, the state is absolutely interrupting the possibility of that because everyone's coming from a place of lack.

Jemma Desai 54:48

Yeah, that's right.

Jemma Desai 54:48

So really thinking about that.

Imran Perretta 54:49

But yeah, and actually, the key thing is to remember that there is abundance, there is like, you sometimes again, have to dig very deep to find it, but, you know, like, for example, through this project, I've encountered so many phenomenal people, you know, people who are involved in the production of the film, people who are working at Chis', working at Spike, wherever, you know, it's been an amazing journey of finding like kindred spirits along the way. And so I have to believe that there's something else, that there's something, there's something sort of better and hopeful. And I think that, you know, I always think of it as like bearing someone's weight, you know, the state is there to bear the weight, our weight,

and we kind of, we in turn, bear the state's weight when we can by paying our taxes and being like responsible citizens and all this kind of stuff. And the state when the state is now no longer able to bear the weight of your circumstances, who will? And for so many people, there's a void there. And I'm very fortunate that in my family, and my group of friends, peers, colleagues, whatever, you know, there's a lot of love and a lot of mutual respect, and people will step in, but there are people who are in situations where that's not possible. And so I personally want to think about how, like I said, I can use my limited time on this earth to be able to maybe step in for the people that don't have that safety net, that don't have that privilege of being a Londoner, for example, that don't have like a native Londoner, you know, that don't have the means and don't have the people around them to bear their weight. And we should all, we should all feel held, do you see what I mean, like at one point or another in our lives, we should all feel held because one day, we're going to be holding up someone else. And I think this is just an abiding moral to sort of live by, is, is that really, and so yeah, we should all be holding each other but also people that we don't know. Because yeah, the Conservatives aren't going to do it. Bottom line. So we're going to have to, but we can, many hands make light work, you know?