

## Lisette Auton Hearing from Artists

*Lisette Auton is a Disabled writer, activist, spoken word artist, theatre maker and creative practitioner who puts people at the heart of her practice. She is based in the North East of England. Lisette has worked with MIMA on numerous projects, including Celebrating Age, a programme of creative engagement with the over 55s. She is in conversation with Kate Moses, Public Programmes Assistant Curator, in April 2020.*

**KM: You're a creative practitioner, activist, theatre-maker and spoken word performer. How did you start out and were there any challenges to overcome?**

LA: I trained in acting at Bretton Hall College of Education in Yorkshire. There was a strong emphasis on work in the community. I had the opportunity to work in schools and probation hostels amongst other settings. I knew I didn't want to teach or act in a traditional manner and wanted to combine creativity and community. I was just beginning to work this out when I became seriously unwell and had to move back home to be looked after by my parents. There were long, dark, isolated years. Once I was able, I started writing, I became a secret scribbler. There were many hiccups, steps forward, giant leaps back, a part time Masters degree in Community Development, a stint as Senior Community Development Worker for the Army Welfare Service. All trying to combine creativity and community, but still trying to be the Old Lisette, with her Old



Photo: PaperBoat Photography by Laura Tindall

Body. I didn't know how to accept and delight in what I could do now, and instead clung desperately on to an old version that no longer existed.

A few things happened all at the same time: earning a place on Writers' Block's mentoring programme which in turn gave me the opportunity to be a Writer in Residence at MIMA, and led to an incredible conversation with Learning Curator Claire Pounder. Getting a place on the Greater Tees Creative Practitioner Programme at ARC in Stockton and meeting Vici Wreford-Sinnott, a phenomenal director, writer and disability activist, and joining the Tees Women Poets. It was like a massive KAPOW moment. I learned who I was as a disabled person and took pride in it, understanding how to combine my artistic practice with my education and training and love of working with the community. Most of all I learned how to do it all so it worked for me and my body.

My brain needs new input, loves problem solving, multiple projects, planning, lists, organising, devising, developing, stretching, learning. This role allows all of that, with the massive joyous and unpredictable bonus of working with people in all their myriad and glorious forms. I plan something meticulously, then the mood of a session goes in a completely different direction and I need to adapt, fast. I love words, I love people, I love being able to combine the two and make it work for my body and brain, and therefore



Photo: Lisette Auton

ensure what I do works for other people's bodies and brains too. I'm ludicrously lucky to find work that isn't work.

**KM: Since 2017, you have worked as a lead facilitator on Celebrating Age, a programme of creative engagement with the over 55s, led by MIMA and delivered with a range of collaborators, including Thirteen Group. Could you share how you became involved in the project and what it has entailed?**

LA: I had worked with MIMA on their schools programme, developing work that could be delivered about all things wordy. During this, I'd popped into Creative Age sessions held at MIMA and loved the vibrancy, the care and compassion, the relationships with the older people and how this was completely embedded in delivering excellence in art. The work they created together was astounding. I was asked if I only worked with words, the answer to which was no, and before I knew it I was on the incredible rollercoaster that is the Celebrating Age project.

I've had the privilege of working with groups in their own spaces in residential homes across the Tees Valley, and watching them grow. It has built up my confidence; I literally have no idea what will happen once I walk through the door. Well-made plans can be ditched due to changes

in venue, ill health, a need to just talk and be, random dancing and singing, point blank refusals and lots of arguments over biscuit selections. Somehow, through all of that, each group of residents has taken ownership, chosen their own path and creativity, in many cases become self-sustaining. I am no longer needed. That is how it should be.

**KM: What were some of the stories that emerged and how do you respond to those you work with?**

LA: Each group had their own stories, some rooted in their past and heritage, others about what was happening now in their lives and neighbourhood. I work alongside. I do not lead. I learn. I tease things out, then I'm quiet and listen. Then we create work together. In many of the groups, natural leaders emerged, so I worked to support them.

Some groups wanted to learn new skills each week, others wanted to work towards a larger project. We made banners to welcome others into their settings. The pride when these were framed and hung was enormous. One group loved music, so we worked through the decades, dancing and singing and creating art that reflected on the era. One of my favourite memories is leaving the room, long after everyone else, after picking up eleven



Photo: Taken at the Disconsortia DIY Cabaret by Kev Howard



Photo: Vital Xposure

million sequins, and finding the whole group gathered in the dining hall under the clock, still wearing their flapper headbands and serenading me as I left.

I work with words and wanted to give the groups the opportunity to do this too. We created incredible poems together, about them, where they live, what is of value and importance in their lives. We also created community charters, a poetic and lyrical, non-boring manifesto for how they wanted to function as a group. I am deeply proud of those, they are the groups' words, a political statement, a challenge and a promise. I wrote lyrical essays about my time with each of the groups and left it with them – they belong to them.

**KM: In June 2019, support for your first novel from Penguin Random House UK's WriteNow mentoring scheme was announced. Tell us about the experience so far and what else you have planned for 2020.**

LA: Getting a place on the scheme was a huge shock, followed by a steep learning curve. Learning about the industry and how it works, which felt so remote and a heavily guarded fortress, a completely alien world. I'm a disabled working class lass from the North East, writing about disabled children on the North East coast, I'm not a natural fit for this. Then I challenged myself. Why shouldn't I be? Why shouldn't we be?

It's been incredible, but also felt like a year-long job interview, permanently wanting to prove my worth. My editor has been exceptional. Thanks to her, I'm starting to believe that I should be there. I secured an amazing agent at the beginning of this year and I'm working on final edits now. It feels like the dream is just about within touching distance.

2020 plans are tentative, I don't know the landscape of the world in which we will find ourselves. My diary was full of performances, festivals, work in community settings and schools – now it is not. I should have been on a national tour as an actor in Medicine's *Monstrous Daughters* with Vital Xposure, a disabled-led theatre company. I'd just finished three weeks rehearsals at the Hackney Empire when the world shut down. I hope we will find a way to still bring that work to an audience.

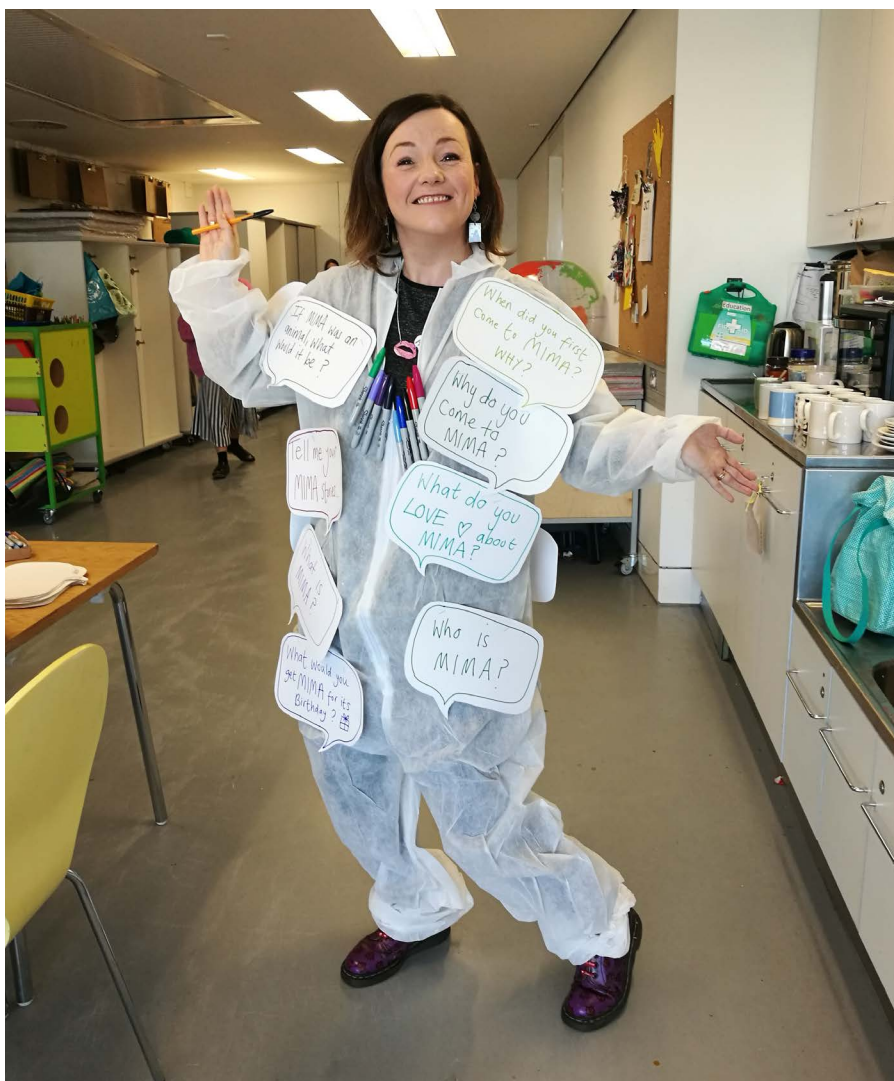


Photo: MIMA

I'm re-grouping, working out who I am as an artist, where I'd like to develop and grow. I've been working on a devised performance piece called Writing the Missing for a long time, but as a disabled artist with very little spare energy, it had taken 99th place to other work. There is time now to create, and a new method in which to gather. It feels even more pertinent in these strange times. You can find out about it on the blog on my website: [www.lisetteauton.co.uk](http://www.lisetteauton.co.uk)

**KM: As we write, the UK has been in lockdown for three weeks as a result of Covid-19, with many aspects of our lives changed. How do you feel about this moment in the pandemic?**

LA: I currently feel overwhelmed, terrified, grateful. Everything else too, but mainly these on a continuing cycle, which in itself is overwhelming. The unreality of the situation... I feel like I'm living in a dream or a film; this

can't possibly be real. The quiet on my street, the anxious feeling when someone comes towards me, walking in the middle of a now quiet road, holding my breath, birdsong, time. My brain and world are often just on the edge of reality so I've found it hard to know where to cling.

I'm terrified for my disabled friends and allies. We know what it's like to be deemed vulnerable on a regular basis, but in this time it has implications of eugenics and the survival of the fittest, for example with disabled people receiving letters asking them to choose DNR (do not resuscitate) orders, and the lack of PPE available to people receiving care in their own homes. These are dark terrifying times for everyone, and especially so as a disabled person. I feel powerless to help. Words had deserted me for a while, that really scared me, they are tentatively coming back and I am cherishing that.