

'Making Links'

Transcription poems
by
Allan Sutherland

From the words of Tony Heaton

Contents

Home
Growing Up
Trialling
Legal
R.T.A.
Transfer
'Springback'
Spinal Cord Injury
On the Ward
Making Progress
Physio
Homecoming
Art college
Discovery
Valid Carriage
Recovery
I Did Leave Art College
Filling In
Record Shop Days
Moving On
Essay
'Wave Rock'
Identification
Making Tracks
'Leadline'
'Six Circles'
'Split'
Remembrance of Things Past
'Wheelchair Entrance'
Rules of Engagement
North-West Shape
A Bit of a Drag
'Out of Ourselves'
Old Black Dog

On the Board
RADAR
Access Groups
In The Front Door
Citizens Advice Bureau
Creation
Inspiration
Making 'Great Britain from a Wheelchair' (1)
Making 'Great Britain from a Wheelchair' (2)
Squirrelling
Titles are Really Important to Me
Rigour
Holton Lee
Interview
Investment
Making It Happen
Submission
Moving On
Buildings
Shape
Handover
Getting Started
Bursary
The Problem with Our Sector, Allan
Putting It Together
The Last Open
The Strands of Shape
In or Out?
The Shape of Things
Thoughts on Being a Disability Artist
Serpent Form
Channel Four Commission
'Monument to the Unintended Performer'
Plans
Wall of Power

Home

My dad was a motorcyclist,
so there was always motorbikes
and taking stuff to bits
and putting things back together going on.

Somebody'd just bring something along
and say can you have a look at this
and he'd say yeah what is it,
it's a this, alright, start to look at it.

He'd trained to be a coppersmith.
That was his trade, coppersmith,
and he worked for Leyland Motors.
You know straight in the factory
making trucks, buses, tanks, all that stuff.
And my mum was at home looking after kids.

So it's probably a fairly straightforward
working class existence,
strict rules,
rules of engagement,
this is what you did, this is what you said,
this is how you looked, this is how you behaved.
Proper.

Growing Up

I guess when I was young
there was still very much
that sense of austerity,
that things were gonna get better.

We'd just go in the woods,
collect firewood and make a den,
light a fire, stick some spuds in it, you know,
we were pretty feral, really.
Up and down trees.

We were frightened of nobody,
you know kids are frightened today, aren't they?
Eight of us with spears,
half naked running through a wood,
You wouldn't fuck with us.

Trialling

We started riding motor bikes
when we were eleven, twelve years old.
We did BMXey type things.
You know we'd ride through streams
and kind of, over set-up things,
you know planks of wood
that you'd go over and really narrow things.

we used to do time trials,
And nobody ever beat me,
I knew that track like the back of my hand.
And I could drive through woods, through streams,
I was quite a competent rider.

So it was, I'm slightly scratching my head
when I had a road traffic accident.

Legal

It's kind of an irony,
the fact that I'd been riding a motorcycle illegally
for five years, you know flying through woods,
delivering paper round in the morning with a,
no helmet or anything,
just woolly hat, big coat.

Never seemed to be any police around
when I was a kid, you know.
It never occurred to me that I'd get stopped
and someone would say can we see your licence.
Of course you can't, I'm fucking eleven.

So I then finally became legal,
I got this legal bike, had an MOT,
I got a driving licence, I got insurance.
And fuck me,
a couple of months later
I had this traumatic accident.

R.T.A.

It was dark, it was December,
it was probably quite horrible, greasy road.
And I was, well it's classic,
some guy in a wagon turned right in front of me.

I was coming in this opposite direction,
he was parked in the middle of the road here
and he started to pull in front of me.

So I started to go round the back and of course
as soon as I started to do that
lost the bike, so the bike slid on its side.

If the guy had've carried on going,
I'd have just slid down the middle of the road,
probably been fine.

But he, once he saw me,
(he probably saw the bike
flip on its side)

he banged his brakes on
and I thought shiiit, you know,
the next minute I was underneath the wagon.

I vaguely remember
being in the middle of the road,
I vaguely remember
people being around me.
I vaguely remember
being in the most intense pain I've ever felt.
And then I don't really remember much.

Transfer

It's all very hazy
(probably got a shot of morphine).
I vaguely remember being on a board
and one of the neighbours brought my mum to see me
(me dad was at work)
and again it's all very hazy.

And the next day they transferred me
to the Spinal Injuries Unit.
I just remember being in an ambulance
with this small Chinese nurse.
And we seemed to be in it hours and hours and hours.
I kept throwing up,
mostly blood, pretty horrible,
and she was having to clean me up and,
must probably have been quite a mess,
and we got to Southport.

I could hear seagulls
and it was bright blue sky, you know
and it was December, a beautiful day,
some of those days you get this fantastic blue sky
and I could hear these seagulls.

And I thought where the fuck am I?
I just thought, oh, I must be on the seaside,
I don't know what I'm doing here,
I'm obviously down South,
because it took hours.

What you don't realise at the time
is the ambulance goes at three miles an hour
because they don't want to bounce or vibrate you.
They know you've got a spinal injury.

But they transferred me
out of the ambulance and
this guy who I now know,
who was called Mike, he had a birthmark,
really big birthmark
all one side of his face down his neck.
I was sort of laid in traction on my back,
and I could see his left hand side.

Big man, and he was very loud,
his laughter was really loud.
And then he turned round
and it's like this purple face
and I thought what the fuck's going on here.

And I didn't know whether I was in reality or not,
you know is this some weird,
am I in hell, you know where am I, what's going on,
because you've got no control over anything,
this mad guy laughing outrageously.

And it was almost like he did that haahaha, you know
and it's from this sort of perfect side of his face
to this very big birthmark.
It's almost like, you know very theatrical.
But whether that's morphine or not
I don't know.

I was saying, will I have to have an operation
and they said, no you won't have an operation.
Then about an hour later
they got me ready for theatre.

Apparently some visiting surgeon from Sweden,
just happened to be there.

And he said we will do
this experimental thing that I've been doing,
so I got the springs, you know.
I don't think they do that any more.

He basically drilled into
the good vertebrae at the top and bottom,
put these four springs, two on each side
which you can see on the sculpture.

'Springback'

I just thought the interesting thing was
the juxtaposition of medical springs
with motorbike springs that were on a bike .
The idea that I would call it 'Springback',
it's part of springing back
from a traumatic accident.
(I often call it a self-portrait.)

And I had to nick the X-rays from the hospital
because they wouldn't give them me.

There's always like this
big orange envelope full of X-rays.
they just leave them hanging around, don't they.
So I just secreted the two I wanted,
rolled them up and stuck them
down the back of my chair.

They're quite interesting,
they've got the little tag on it,
so its got my name, date of birth, all that,
so it's quite autobiographical when you look at it.

Spinal Cord Injury

I don't know how many nerves
I've severed in my spinal cord.
Not all of them, obviously,
because I'm incomplete.

But, you know,
how big's a spinal cord?
It's like a fucking telephone wire, isn't it?

How much damage?
Milli..well not even millimetres,
you know, you're measuring in
thousandths of inches, aren't you?

Which is why it's so difficult to fix, you can't fix it,
such a complicated bunch of wires.
And yeah, I mean slightly more damage,
you're completely paralysed,
you only have to do a small amount of damage,
you're fucked, aren't you?

On the Ward

It was a mad regime.
Get fucking dressed,
get undressed,
then you'd get undressed,
then you'd go for a wash,

Christ, going down for a wash in this big sluice room,
like being in the army, you know,
just toilet after toilet. Toilets didn't have doors,
just had curtains, you could hear everybody
having a shit, smelt awful.

But when you were, eventually
a guy came and evacuated your bowels.
And you could smell him.
You know coming down the ward,
fucking hell he's getting nearer and nearer.

Couldn't see much,
because you were in traction.
His name was Jack,
so we called him Jack the Evac.

He'd put a rubber glove on,
dip his hand in some Vaseline,
stick his finger up your arse, you know. Horrible.
Pain, you could feel the pain, horrible.
Anyway, we don't want to talk about that.

Making Progress

I didn't, really,
see myself as a disabled person.
I never, I always thought
I was gonna get better,
that it was just taking a long time.
And that's probably because I'm incomplete,

The doctor said to my parents
he'll never walk, he'll never have children.
And he'll probably die roundabout,
maybe before he's even forty.

Prognosis for someone with spinal injury
wasn't great, you know, back in 1970.
Bladder infections, kidney infections,
kidney failure, it wasn't..
or you'd get a pressure sore.
And the pressure sore'd kill you.

My early life was, you know
urine infection after urine infection, really.
And it grinds you down.
But I started to get,
I could move my big toe, no, can I?

No, I could move a muscle in my thigh.
I thought, I can move that.
And it was, I was still in hospital.
And I thought, can I move it?

Because then they talk about muscle spasm,
it's basically what happens,
because you're not using your muscles.
They atrophy, shrink. You'll feel pain

because they're shrinking.
And they might twitch.

And it's a nervous,
it's a sort of automatic response, twitch thing.
I didn't have much sensation in my legs.
But they said, you know there's a lot of trauma,
lot of bruising round that area.
So as the bruising and the swelling goes down,
we'll have to see what happens.

So I just started getting this,
I thought I can move that muscle,
in my thigh. And that's all I did,
I was like a tenacious, I just,
all the fucking time twitched the muscle.
Twitch the muscle, twitch the muscle,
did it all the time.
And it did get stronger, you know.

And I was obsessive for years,
two years maybe, all the time,
everything I could move,
I'd be like a twitching speed freak really,
just twitching and moving whatever I could.

Physio

The first time I got up, sat up,
was awful. They literally threw some clothes at me
and said okay, you can get up now.

Who's gonna help me? Nobody.
If you can get dressed, you can get up.
Can't get dressed, you can't get up.
Alright, fuckers.

Get half a sock on, knackered.
But it was tough love.
You had to get dressed.

If you couldn't get dressed,
you couldn't look after yourself,
you couldn't manage.
You weren't going home.

Young woman in physiotherapy,
she took me up the steps in the hospital.
Every step was killer,
because you've got two full-length calipers on,
couldn't bend your knee,
literally got to sort of wobble, wobble,
you know flight of stairs, walk all the way along,
down the stairs at the other side,
all the other way back along.

She must have had immense patience,
because that took a long time.
It was incredibly tiring, you know,
it was dragging your body. And she'd just
sort of walk along, half a pace at a time.
'Come on, you lazy bastard!'

(You never thank people, do you,
for these things.)

It was tough
but you had to become robust and get on with it.
So I was out of there in three months,
it was a record time.
Nobody'd been out that quickly.

Homecoming

And I came home,
my dad used to carry me upstairs,
extraordinary to think about it, you know,
literally carry me upstairs.

He went in the shed,
went in his shed and made a wooden support
for the wash-hand basin in the bathroom,
said to lean on it to have a wash,
so I didn't, basically didn't
drag the wash hand basin off the wall, you know.

No fucking OT, physio, home visits,
none of that,
he carried me up to bed and had a wash.

Spent a lot of time in my bedroom,
mates'd come round,
skin up a few joints, get stoned
and that was life.
You don't enquire why.

Then I went to art college.

Art college

Some of my mates were gonna go to art college
go to Lanchester Polytechnic,
try and get in the Royal College of Art and all, you know.
I'd think how the fuck am I gonna go to London
in an invalid carriage. Where am I gonna live?

So I looked round
and the most accessible art college
was at Southport. I knew Southport,
'cause I was at spinal injuries unit there.

Amazing that they accepted me.
I didn't think my portfolio was particularly good.
Maybe they just thought, well alright
you've got a talent that we can develop.

I did a year's foundation course.
Which was great, I loved it.
And that's when I discovered
that I was really working class.

Discovery

If you live a working class existence,
on an estate full of people like you,
that're all like your dad,
they all go to factory,

you know at Christmas
you go in their houses
and their houses are like yours,
their kids are like you.

Then you just go
eighteen miles down the road
and suddenly different world.
There's people with cars and money
and *stuff*. Very privileged.

So I guess, you know
being seventeen, eighteen years old,
suddenly realise that there are
people with a lot more privilege.

Valid Carriage

I had a picture, I'd painted a picture of,
I can't remember if it was Black Sabbath,
some album cover with some devil's head
on the roof inside. And on the door,
because we used to call them Noddy cars,
I painted a picture of Noddy and Big Ears
on the sliding door.

Big Ears has his arm round Noddy.
And he had his hand down Noddy's trousers,
squeezing his balls. And it was like a cartoon,
Noddy and Big Ears.

I remember going to the Bickershaw pop festival
with about six motorcycle outriders,
you know we were all doing forty-five miles an hour
because that's about as fast as the invalid carriage went.

So I was sort of in the middle at the front,
with all these motorcyclists, Hell's Angels, behind,
driving down the middle of the road,
quite ludicrous, I can imagine it looking
like a ludicrous thing to see.

Recovery

I think I probably said
I had an accident I'm getting better.
They probably thought by the time he gets here,
he'll be, walk better. Yeah. So,
I don't think there was any intention.

But I did think I was getting better, you know.
I was getting better,
you get more mobility, you move around.
I'm sixteen, I'm strong,
I'm young, I'm fit,
you know lot to be thankful for.

If you're going to have a spinal injury,
have one when you're strong enough to recover.
And mentally able to, to just take what,
what's coming at you.

Then I guess it dawned on me
that I wasn't going to get much better,
because the rate of progress stopped, you know.
I'd kind of got all the strength,
movement back
that I was gonna get, really.

And so it was always walk with a stick,
use your chair, walk with a stick,
use your chair, you know it was,
I use my chair an awful lot more now.

I Did Leave Art College

I got kicked out of college
'cause I wasn't a particularly good student
and I wasn't really interested
in the art that was on offer
at that particular place.

I think art's an old guy's game, really.
I dunno, maybe that's madness,
maybe it's not an old man's game.
But it feels like there's a lot to learn

to get to a place
before you start to really think about
and appreciate work,
particularly work that's gone before.

I mean I used to skip past the marble carvings,
to get to twentieth century work,
to get to what's now.
And it's only when you start carving marble
that you realise how fucking difficult it is.

And then you start to think, well hang on,
this was made in the fifteen, sixteen hundreds.
Didn't have power tools,
no really good steel tools,
no light, no electricity, phenomenal really.
You wonder how that work got made. Stunning.

I was too young
to go to art college really.

Filling In

I started working.

I just did a series of meaningless jobs,
can't even remember them,
working in factories, printing, printing mostly,
printing machine manuals for Atkinson vehicles.
I got married, had a child,

did graphic design, painted signs, made posters,
so made a bit of a strange sort of living
from doing creative things, commercial creative things.

I did that for a few years.

I had a printing press
in the living room of my house,
to print jobs off on.

Bit mad, but there you are.

Record shop days

I had some money left over
and a shop came up.
Which had been a wet fish shop,
it was one storey.

My sister-in-law saw it, said,
hey there's a shop for sale.
So I bought it.

And me and my best friend Mark and my dad
set to knocking all these blue tiles off.
Stunk of fish. It had penetrated the tile
and the grouting round the tiles.
So we just knocked it, made a counter.

I bought some second hand records
from a guy who had a shop in Preston,
He wanted to get out the business,
he wanted to go into night clubs,
and he had two thousand LPs
and some browsers.

Got this massive big mahogany mirror,
and we screwed it to the wall,
painted it matt black,
and it made the shop look really big.

It was called New World Records.
Tagline, 'A haven for the musically insane'.
'All records guaranteed round'.
Some bollocks.

Moving On

One of my great friends died
when he was twenty-one.
That was a very traumatic time.
He got into the Slade school
and he wandered off to London.
And then he died. Twenty-one.

I can still see his funeral in my mind,
in this little church
where my daughter went to school.
And I can still hear his mum wailing.
His mum was quite old,
got caught in a change of life
sort of thing, you know.
So she always seemed much older than everybody,
more like his grandma than his mum.
And her wailing was just dreadful,
that anguish and grief and awful, awful.
And, you know guys, girls that knew him
just kept to the back of the church.
What the fuck's this,
first funeral I'd ever been to. Horrific.
You can't believe it can you
when like your good friend's died?

And for no reason.
Didn't get wrapped up on a motorbike or anything,
it wasn't a proper death. Just fell over.
And he had so much talent.

So I just decided to go to university.

Essay

I did the access courses
and the can you write an essay courses
and all that carry-on.

I remember doing an A level question,
again externally, and Steven Sartin,
who was the keeper of fine art
at the Harris Museum in Preston,
and he was the tutor and I was gutted
that I got really a bad mark.

And he said, it's a brilliant essay,
but what you have to remember is
the people who mark A level papers
don't necessarily know very much about art.
So they get a sort of crib sheet that says
did you mention full names,
did you mention dates,
did you mention key pieces of work,
you know compare Constable and Turner,
you know the classic exam question.

You can't deviate,
you can't create the unique discussion
around Turner and Constable,
you've got to, basically you've got to follow a formula.

I'd got no fucking idea you had to do that.
I thought I'd written a really clever essay.
And once he said that I thought,
fuck it, then that's what you do.
You know it's just a matter
of counting the beans.
It's cynical really, isn't it?

'Wave Rock'

We started an access group then.
And we modelled the front of the museum.
Ian Hamilton Finlay,
the brilliant Scottish sculptor and concrete poet,
he made the front for the Harris,
the Wave Rock sculpture,
which is brilliant, you know.
It was seen as one of the most innovative access solutions.
And it was in this poxy little gallery in Preston,
nobody'd ever heard of it.

What he did was create a drum,
so the steps went up there,
the drum was here and the ramp,
you went towards the steps
and then you went round.
But as you went round
you got higher and higher and higher.
And when you came out the other side
to join the steps you sort of did this
three quarters of the circle.
And he carved in the drum, big stone drum,
and it just said, 'wave rock'.

And what Finlay said is,
the people are the wave,
and the museum is the rock.
So the rock is changed imperceptibly by the wave,
just as a museum is changed imperceptibly
by the people who visit it.

Beautiful sentiment
for a two word concrete poem.
He was a genius, really.

Identification

My best tutor at university was Paul Hatton,
I've just been to his funeral, he's just died,
but he was the guy, we went on Morecambe beach.
So we just walked on the wet beach,
making stuff, you know.

(Andy Goldsworthy was making
interesting work in the environment,
he's probably a couple of years older than us.)

It's like, okay, what would Goldsworthy,
rock, pool, leaves, you know, shapes.
And we'd all get on the beach
and walk off in different directions.

And Paul Hatton said 'I always know where you are'.
I said, how, what do you mean?
He said, well your footprints are different than everybody else's
so there are a lot of footprints over there,
I know there's ten students,
there, there, there, there and there.
And I know Heaton's there.

Cause your footprints, your feet stick out,
your crutches make. And I went ah yeah.
He said, it's very distinctive.
Perhaps you ought to think about how
you can use that in your work.
I thought, yeah, alright.

Making Tracks

So I did the easiest thing in the world,
get some plaster, take it down and walk across the beach,
get some seawater, get some cardboard
and some you know, just paperclips,
make a plaster cast, put it over the footprints,
fill it with plaster,
end up with these plates with footprints in it.

And I just exhibited that work in a gallery,
one door there, one door there.
And then these footprints and crutch marks just walk,
basically meandered from one door to the other.

And then I extended that
by getting some false legs from the ALAC,
the Artificial Limb and Appliance Centre,
so I'd like false toes, false ankle, false below knee, false.
And basically had them, again,
walking across a room,
just getting bigger and bigger and bigger.
So the footprint went from artificial toes
to just incrementally bigger.
I was making work like that really.

'Leadline'

It's a line of tree trunks,
about nine inches high,
about fifteen inches in diameter,
roughly sawn. And I lined them up,
but not in a straight line. And then
I carved a channel out of each one.

So the channel on this one
is roughly in the middle,
the channel on the next one
is quite close to the edge, so,
but it's quite spinal, it's quite,
you know, vertebrae,

and then this lead is planished,
hammered into the groove,
which is probably about two inches wide
and lapped over the edge.

And it's quite hammered
into the wood surface.
But the thing that
connects the wood together

is the lead line.
So there's a soft bit of lead,
you can see this bit in the middle here,
which connected the wood together.

So the wood,
the tree trunk circles
don't touch each other
but the lead connects them all up.

And I made quite a few works like this.
I really enjoyed it.
Lead's an interesting material.
It's quite poisonous as well.
Melting it down
probably not the best of ideas.

I just love the way that you can hammer it
and it changes shape, softens out,
it's quite soft, malleable, but it's quite,
it's got great history, you know
and guttering, cathedrals, all that.

'Six Circles'

And then, this is a very early work
called 'Six Circles'.

1989, carved out of elm trunks.

Again, it's about re-connecting.

So this is the same tree,

these are five quite big,

these are probably thirty inches in diameter,

maybe even more, that's probably four inch,

what d'you call that thing,

floorboard. 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9, 18,27,36.

Yeah, so probably thirty-six inches across..

The diameter of that. So all these bits of tree

belong together as a tree trunk

and somebody cut them into slices.

So I wanted to reconnect them

by carving a circle into the top of each one.

And this is 'Squaring the Circle',

this is where 'Squaring the Circle' came from,

way back in 1989.

So it's trying to reunite this broken circle,

but the lead connected each one,

but this you don't need the lead,

you use your brain

or your eyes and your brain,

because you look at the circle

and you make a circle out.

Can you see that? You look at that

and it becomes a circle in your mind.

I used to do lots of work,

come back to this idea over and over again,
this idea of reconnecting things together.
I'm sure there's a psychology to it
of trying to reunite broken bodies,
I'm sure there is something deeply related to the,
you know to the psyche of
how do you reconnect things,
how do you rebuild things.

And lots of my work, you know,
plays around with that,
like 'Split'.

'Split'

The wood turner said there's a shake
in this piece of wood.
I can't remember what,
it might be ash, yeah ash.
There's a great split down it.

And I just had it in the studio,
probably for two years,
what the fuck am I gonna do with that,
I didn't want to turn it into smaller bits of wood.
I wanted to keep it as one piece.
I thought well, how do you,
how do you make something with a rend,
a great rend down the middle of it, you know?

It's a beautiful thing, you could see,
you could see inside the crack,
the wood, tearing you know,
still connected, so as the wood splits,
you've still got that, almost like a,
like chewing gum stretched inside it somehow.

And then I just thought it's a fucking split.
Just carve the word 'split' into it.
Job done, you know.
Got some chisels, three hours later or whatever,
you know, just 's' on the side 'p','l','t'
and again it's like your,
you know you talked about
'Great Britain From A Wheelchair'
and like, you see it or you don't see it,
'Split's exactly the same,
people either look at it and go but, but,
you know they don't get it,

and then suddenly.

Or some people just look
at it and straightway go split yeah, good one.
The i's the crack isn't it?
You either get it or you don't get it,
it's funny.
Same with 'Great Britain', you either get it
or you don't get it.

Remembrance of Things Past

You don't know how injured your head is, do you,
like fractured skull, what does that mean,
is the damage that they know,
did they care, you know?

I mean, I had a broken ankle
but they never set it because
they didn't figure I'd ever use it again,
so it was just basically put in a woolly,

you know like a sheepskin boot to protect it,
but it was never properly set
or fixed or anything.
Bizarre what they used to do in the old days.

My memory's terrible.
My brother's got a brilliant memory,
I've got a shocking memory.
I don't know whether that's,

how do you know whether it's like you say
chemically damaged or physically damaged
or you know, I had a fractured skull,
I mean my ear was full of blood,
partial hearing loss as a result of it.

Nobody actually said,
by the way you've got brain damage
or it's likely to affect your memory
or anything. So, I'm guessing
that my bad memory
is down to head injury,
but it might not be.

'Wheelchair Entrance'

A lot of my work was around my,
the way I engage with the world.
So an early piece would be 'Wheelchair Entrance',
you know suddenly coming across an art gallery
and the only way you could get in it
was up four steps.

So how do you respond to that
as a wheelchair user?
Well you build a fairly temporal piece
which is a piece of two by one inch wood,
you write Wheelchair Entrance
and you hang it in the doorway
on two bits of string at wheelchair height.

And what you try to do is then
enter the consciousness
of people who walk up the steps
and think what the fuck's that?

You know and realise,
it's slightly inconvenient,
they've got to duck under it
or move it to one side.

And when curators say
we can't show that work in the gallery,
oh why not, well it's breaching health and safety
and it's, people could hurt themselves on it.

And you think, I've made an art piece of work,
it's political, it's potentially dangerous.
Surely that's good. Not rejected
on the grounds of health and safety.
A lot of the work played around with that.

Rules of Engagement

When you think about
the Camden Town painters,
they just looked out of their windows
and painted what they saw, or their friends.

This is why I never quite understand
why people don't get disability art.
You know you look back at great paintings,
Picasso, Toulouse-Lautrec, Degas,

they painted what was there, you know,
they painted the people and the places
that they hung out in. And it was contemporary.
What was happening right there, right then.

And I think that's what disability art does,
it engages with what's happening
right here and right now and what's,
what it is that creates barriers

for us as disabled people.
I think that's interesting.
But I would, wouldn't I.
Just as you do.

North-West Shape

A woman from Shape in the North-West
called Joyce Morris,
came to one of my exhibitions at Lancaster
and said ooh, are you a disabled person?

She said oh, d'you know about Shape?
I said, never heard of it.
But I was making work
that had a disability context.
And she said, oh yeah, there's this,
we work with disabled arts.

Ooh! And that's when I was thinking,
yeah but I'm not really disabled,
you know I'm a working class bloke,
I had a motorcycle accident, yeah, I use a wheelchair.
It was classic denial,
that 'hey, I'm not disabled'.

Of course, what happens later,
when you're more politicised is,
you can say in your head
as many times as you want,
I'm not disabled

but the minute you connect
with another human being
they immediately go,
ah you're disabled.

It's very rare that people
don't ask personal questions.
They don't think anything of it.
And I don't think they mean
to be offensive. But it often is offensive.

A Bit of a Drag

I saw disability as,
well I didn't even see it as
a personal tragedy, I just saw it
was something that happened to me,

and it was a bit of a drag
but I just had to get on and get over it
and sooner I'd do that,
the more I just am assimilated
back into the world that I've come from.

And, yup, I'm a bit of an oddity but, you know,
my sparkling personality
and outward-goingness
will just get me over that hurdle.
I think that's what many people do.

Well you have two choices, don't you?
You do that, or you retreat into,
into a desperate world of..
death I suppose. So yeah,
I was always out and about.

And I had the ubiquitous
blue invalid carriage
to get around in.

'Out of Ourselves'

I was still sceptical and dubious of this,
and I remember going in and the first piece I saw
was Adam Reynolds,
and was the lead suitcase.

And it was in a corner.

This beautifully crafted lead suitcase,
like one of those nineteen thirties, forties leather suitcases
but it was made out of lead. And it was open
and it was full of dead leaves,
and the leaves spilled out into the space.

I was like, fuck!

That's a massively powerful piece of work,
I couldn't believe it, you know it was really good.

And that was it then,

I just thought, yeah, this is alright,
this work stands up.

Who wouldn't want to exhibit with,
I didn't know him, I'd never met him.

But I met him there and then.

And I thought, yeah, what a nice bloke,
what a great guy.

I think it was probably
the first joint show
of disabled artists about disability arts.

(We never thought about that
at the time.) And it was,

I think it was a vanguard moment.

And I think it was a unique moment.

And I met loads of nice people,

But you just meet, you know,
like fuck that was great.

And you don't think, oh yeah
he's a blind, he's a deaf, you know,

it's just like here's a bunch of nice people,
we're having a few beers and they get it,
and they're like me,
they're young and they want to do things,
they're angry about being excluded.
And they're doing something about it.

I can identify with this group of people.
And they bring me different experiences,
'cause you know I,
I'm still a northern bloke, really,
I'm not really escaped from that.

And, this is suddenly
when the penny drops,
you just wanna go wow!
You know let's go to London,
fucking hell yeah, it is amazing,
let's check out all this stuff that's going on.

There was interesting things happening.
But it was very localised,
I always say it was a bit
like abstract expressionism in New York
in 1940 or whatever.
Probably about fifty people
were aware of it.

Disability arts was the same.
You could probably name
the fifty people who were
fully and truly engaged in it.

Old Black Dog

I remember, he was manic depressive.
And he wasn't out about it.
Until there was something happened,
something happened. And he wrote
a very long letter about his black dog.
(I'd no fucking idea what a black dog was.)

And he was saying, yeah I fucked up,
but you never think about me
as a disabled person. But I am.

And there was,
we didn't fucking know you were
a disabled person, you never told us.
Yeah, you're manic, you know you're fast,
you're efficient, you write things.

But the opposite side of that
is desperation, everybody's against you.
And well, you know what it's like
to work with people like that.

And it was that thing
are they part of this,
are they really disabled?
It was very hierarchical actually, wasn't it?

And there were real debates
about whether learning disabled people
should be part of the movement.
Mental health, was that a disability,
mental health? It's extraordinary
now when you look back at it,
cause it was like oppression
within oppression.

On the Board

So, Joyce Morris, then.
Oh you're young. I said, yeah.
And we don't have anybody
on our board that's young.
Why don't you join the Shape Board?

She basically gave me a briefing
on what a charity board was all about.
And I thought, do I wanna sit
with these boring old farts,
you know from Manchester University
and the City Council,
you know, all worthy people.
And it was the great and the good.

And then I thought mm,
they keep giving me work, you know,
two hundred quid a day to go and
do a workshop in the mental institution
or a day centre or something,
quite useful money.

And I ended up
being the Chair of the Board
before I left. I was actually Chair of Shape
in the North-West.

RADAR

Somebody just poked it in front of me,
said there's this organisation in London
called RADAR,
they're looking to appoint field workers
or development workers
in the North-West,
you could do that.

And I thought, well, yeah,
I've just done social administration
and psychology,
I know a bit about this
disability arts malarkey and this
sort of burgeoning civil rights idea.
Yeah, why don't I?

And they said oh we're gonna pay you
twelve grand a year and give you a car.
Fucking hell, that's alright.
That's quite a lot of money.
And what do I have to do?

Well you've basically got to develop
a grass roots disability consciousness
in the North-West.
Tell 'em about RADAR
I mean, the, the weird thing
about the politics then is
the Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People
suddenly hated me. Because I'd
suddenly got into bed with the enemy.
They perceived RADAR
to be a very conservative, and it was,
a conservative organisation.

So they were radical disability-led,

you know banner-waving, hard-left,
and I'd suddenly jumped ship
and had sort of left that hard line
to get a cushy job basically.

And I remember going in to Manchester Coalition. Grrrr.
And I said look, do you want some RADAR keys?
Oh yeah! Here's an accessible hotels guide to the UK
or, all the RADAR publications,
you know I'd just fucking give them to people.

And RADAR keys, which were ridiculously expensive,
in those, I can't remember how much
they were, like three quid,
I dunno whatever they were.
And I'd just give them out to crips
whenever I saw one,
you know, here's a key.

But I got into places of power.

Access Groups

I remember going to places like Chester
and setting up an access group,
using allies in building control and planning,
writing a ten point plan for an access group.

Say, look, stop complaining
that you can't get in the fucking library,
do something about it.
I'd organise disparate groups of disabled people,
often in day centres, saying, look you've got to self-organise,
you need to recruit a chair, and a secretary,
you need to keep minutes, you need to meet regularly,
you need to be properly thoughtful and constituted.

And then you'll get a dialogue with your local authority.
You'll get to see all the plans, and you'll learn about planning,
and you'll influence planning decisions.
That's exactly what happened.
I saw it as a very radical thing to do.

And I was going,
on RADAR's money,
in RADAR's car,
with RADAR's resources,
and setting up access groups.

And some of those access groups
are still going,
thirty odd years later.

In The Front Door

The Spastics Society, the Isle of Man,
said, could RADAR send a speaker
for their Annual General Meeting?
And I was looking at the TTs.

The TTs were either the week before
or the week after. And I said,
I'd love to be your keynote speaker,
but I can't make that date.

So they said yeah, alright,
we can shift the AGM.
So they moved their AGM.
I flew from Blackpool to the Isle of Man.

And they hired me a fucking car,
which I couldn't drive,
because they didn't realise
that I was a wheelchair user.

I got to this building,
twenty steps at the front,
fuck it, back door job.
I went all the way round the building.
How the fuck am I gonna get in here?

And people were wandering in,
suits and dresses and everything.
And I said, excuse me,
are you going to the Spastics Society.
I said can you find this guy,
(I think his daughter had cerebral palsy)
I said can you find this guy, he's an organiser
and I'm a guest speaker
and I can't figure out how to get in.

And he sort of
came through the door,
and he was totally stressed.
Cause they'd obviously said
there's a bloke in a wheelchair outside.
We didn't know you were a wheelchair,
bound to a wheelchair or whatever.

And they got me in, in one way or another,
must have carried me up,
or I must have bummed it up.
But it's so typical.

D'you know what?
That happened
over and over
and over again.

Citizens Advice Bureau

I was doing work in RADAR
with the C.A.B.

How can we make them more accessible?
How can we deliver an understanding of
disabled people's rights within C.A.B.s?

And I thought, d'you know what,
this is a really interesting organisation,
'cause it is about rights,
social justice, information,
information is power.

And a job came up,
area development officer,
a couple of thousand quid more money.
And it was another car, you know,
so yeah alright, time to move on.

And that's what I did,
and again I worked for the C.A.B.,
but again a lot of the work
was driven around disability.

And again I was coming to London
every month just like I was at RADAR.
And finding out more about the, you know
the administrative side of managing change.

So I was doing art and also, you know
quite deeply involved
in administration and politics.

Creation

I was doing all sorts, but doing
exactly what I do now,
which is sit down, think about art,
evaluate what your process is.

So what I formulated then
and what I still adhere to now
is a process that says
you're a creative person
and you can think about art all the time,
because you think about art
looking out the window in a boring meeting,
or on a train or in a taxi,
or having a conversation like this.
So you don't have to go and sit in a garret
and think okay, I'm gonna be a sculptor now
for two hours, it won't work.

So always an artist or always creative,
bring creative thinking into all you do,
that's rule number one for life really.

So I always made sculpture, and actually
the process was, I'm working,
I get reasonably well paid,
that gives me the freedom
to make the work that I wanna make.

Inspiration

The other thing I realised
is that the process could be quite slow,
I didn't have to rush to make art,
so I could just write things down,
put things in books, do drawings
and store ideas up.

The original drawing for
'Great Britain From a Wheelchair',
I think I still have it somewhere.

It was written on the back of a Melolin pad,
which is a heel dressing.
I used to get in bed at night and change,
you know I had an ulcerated heel
which I still have.

And it stops me walking
as much as I might like to walk,
because it breaks down.

And so I'd always have a pad
and some micropore tape
on the bedside table.

Every night I'd put a fresh dressing on.
And I woke up in the middle of the night
with 'Great Britain from a Wheelchair'
rolling about in my head. So I drew it,
just drew it on the fucking,
two inch by two inch square wound dressing.

That was the sort of idea
and I just kept that for ages.
Think I just stuck it with the micropore
into a drawing pad, you know.

And that, probably two years later,
became 'Great Britain From a Wheelchair'.
I wish I'd made it straightaway really.

Making 'Great Britain from a Wheelchair' (1)

I don't make a lot of stuff
that I throw away,
because usually it never gets made.
So the idea gestates for a long time.
It probably kicked around in a,
in a drawing book for ages,
just sellotaped into the drawing book
with a bit of micropore tape.

And then you just go through
a massive thinking process.
It's about what will it look like.
Could you make it using bits of wheelchairs?

And, you know, big wheel there,
you almost assemble it in your brain,
the pushing handle,
that could be like Scotland,
because you've got
this series of islands, coming down,
that could be six backrests
or four backrests or whatever.

And oh yeah, that could be that,
and the little wheel could be Wales,
you know maybe a bigger
jockey wheel for Wales.
And you could use the brakes
for the bit of Cornwall,
the thin bit that goes out,
it's got a ball on the end of it.

I mean you sort of assemble it
in your brain really.

Making 'Great Britain from a Wheelchair' (2)

I literally ripped
the weather map of Britain
out of the Guardian newspaper,
stuck it on an epidiascope,

projected it against
an eight foot by four foot sheet of plywood,
got a fucking great big fat felt pen
and just drew round it.

Put it on the floor,
started to take two wheelchairs,
I think to bits, piled the bits up,
then it was just a fucking jigsaw puzzle.

Two wheelchairs,
completely took to bits,
a box with nuts, bolts,
screws, whatever in it

and my rule was that
I couldn't use anything that was external from that.
So everything had to come
from those two wheelchairs.

It was just a matter
of putting things in place,
you know the lining up holes,

bolting things together,
cutting the armrest, you know,
cutting a bit out the arm rest for this bit.
Dead easy, really.

Squirrelling

It's process.
Ideas come.
If I think they're worth it
I jot them down.

It's a bit like squirrels
hide some food,
deal with it later.

And when I think about it for a while,
I think, well okay if I did do it,
what material would it be,
and how big would it be,
what would it look like?

And I sort of just keep
pushing the process forward.
The great thing about
that kind of process is,
I don't end up surrounded
by millions of failures.

I only really make
the things that I think
I want to make
and that might have,
you know that might stand,
stand up for themselves.

Titles are Really Important to Me

I think about art as,
almost the,
as sort of tangible philosophy.
So it is how do you wrap thoughts,
idea and explanations into form?

I'm reluctant to admit this
but there is a huge intellectual process
that goes into thinking about the work,
the materials, the title
and what I'm going to say about the work.

And that's important, that
as a working class northerner
I'm not comfortable about admitting that,
cause it smacks of intellectual
namby-pamby middle class pooftery.

So don't tell anybody!

Rigour

I'm a working class person,
you take motorbikes to bits,
you put them back together,
you get covered in oil, you swear.
But I devoured books, you know.

Me and my dad never really got on.
We were at loggerheads.
But the older I get, and of course he's dead now,
and I can't have this discussion with him.
But he, he was right, always.
I was too stubborn to realise,
too thick, you know, and too reluctant.

But he didn't present it in a way
that was accessible and acceptable to me.
He always, he got the message right,
he failed to get the delivery of the message right.

The message was you read books
and you learn things. And you apply that
to practical things
and they will be successful.

There are no shortcuts
even though you think there are.
And you want there to be,
and I know this because I, like you,
have tried every shortcut,
doesn't fucking work.
So you do have to follow those rules
to achieve what you want to achieve.

But he never had the patience to explain that.
So I'd just say yeah. Yeah but fuck that.
I'm gonna just go from three to seven to ten.

And he'd just say then you're a fool.
Slap you round the back of the head.

Yeah, and say what a waste of space you are
and I'll say fuck you and I'll show you..
And sometimes you could.
And then he'd say, yeah you're so smart.
And sometimes it wouldn't and he'd say,
there you are, I fucking told you.

And he'd win more often than I, you know,
over ten rounds he would win seven of em.
It's about, you know,
it's not just about the message,
it's about the delivery of the message as well, isn't it?

And I, as I slowly become him,
you know I suddenly realise that,
that you do things and you can do things intuitively.
And you can also read, and learn and apply,
and you can do things that way.
And having rigour is actually quite important.

Whether you're making art or writing,
or driving a bus,
it doesn't matter what it is does it,
you need to apply rigour to it.

And I think it's one thing
that disabled people
actually have a standing start on,
or whatever the word is.
Because we are great planners
and organisers and strategists.

We don't apply those terms to it,
we just think, fuck,
if I'm gonna get through life,

I've gotta do x,y,z,
better make sure, what's plan B,
okay, we're okay,
and what's plan C if plan B goes tits-up.
And we do that all the time.

I do it, I'm sure you do it,
I have contingencies for everything.
And actually you can
apply those contingencies
to being successful in what you wanna do,

whether it's making a piece of sculpture
or running an organisation.
So being disabled's
taught me huge amounts.

Probably taught me
a lot of patience as well, you know,
and slowed me down.

Otherwise I'd just be another motorcycle statistic
on a tombstone somewhere.
Ride fast, die young.

Holton Lee

My partner saw this advert, in the Guardian, I think,
and said, this'd be a brilliant job for you.

It's running this amazing, this
what looks like an amazing place
called Holton Lee.
And you know, four aspects:
the environment, spirituality, disability and the arts.

And I said, this is an evangelical
Christian hotbed of nonsense, you know.
And then I thought fuck it apply,
it was probably about ten grand
more than I was earning at the time.
And again the carrot of the car.

Applied for the job, got an interview,
what's the worst that can happen,
we can have an expenses-paid
weekend in Poole.
The unthinkable thing that could happen
is that I'd actually be offered the job.

And I distinctly remember saying, look,
they're gonna want a retired vicar,
or a retired social services person
or a military person, actually,
cause it's all public school boys
and we know who runs the charities in this country.

I thought the last person
they're gonna employ
is a long-haired radical sculptor who's,
you know, got my track record really.
But Sir Tom Lees was an unorthodox man.

Interview

I'm on the sticks, go for a pee,
one of those little brass lock things,
zipped up, washed my hands,
got hold of the little brass thing to open,
it fell off in my hand.
I was locked in the bog.

So, I like put the stick out of the window,
I fucking climbed out,
my balls are hanging on the fucking thing that's,
you know the bit that you put the window-opening thing on.

Dragging myself,
it wasn't easy.
Fucking hard work
climbing out the window.

'What would you do in your first six months?'
'I'd fix the fucking toilet in there.
That path needs fixing,
this is ridiculous, how can you have this?'

I just went on a major rant.
A controlled, and relatively polite,
I didn't say fix the fucking toilet,
but I said there is a huge amount of things
that are wrong here.
And you know, you've gotta get the foundations right
before you can even have these big dreams
that you're talking about here.

These dreams are rhetoric,
we need to get the reality in place
and you need to do this
and you need to do that.

And I remember them saying,
well there's four aspects here.
I said, look, I'm an artist, I know about art.
I did environmental art, I lived in a rural place,
I went running around in woods,
I've worked on a farm,
I went bird-watching,
I was in the boy scouts.

I know about trees,
I know what they're called,
I know about nature.
I'm not an environmentalist
but I know a huge amount about it.

I know about disability,
I'm a disabled person,
politics of disability.

I said I know nothing about spirituality,
but you do. And as long as you do,
that's all we need. I'll do the three things,
you do the bit that you're good at.
And I fucked off out.

And before I, when I got back to Cumbria,
Tom Lees had sent me a really long fax.
It was on the fax machine when I got in,
saying would you like the job.

Investment

I rang Bert Massie at RADAR
and said, Bert, I'm thinking about
taking this job at Holton Lee.

They've got three months running costs,
fucking great, three hundred and fifty acres,
it's got, it's a blank slate,
I can make it fantastic.
Who can I go to for money?

And he said,
ring Peter Attenborough
at the Rank Foundation,
tell him what you're doing.

He said, well,
we're investing in leadership and excellence
or something like that.
And he got me sixty grand
within weeks.

And I just got my sleeves rolled up
and I worked twenty-four hours a day,
seven days a week there really.
I invested a huge amount in Holton Lee.

And I was forty, something like that.
You know, I was in my prime, really.
I felt I'd got knowledge.
I felt I knew shit, you know.

Making It Happen

The world felt like a great place,
you know, and it was like fuck it,
New Labour, let's get on,
let's re-invent this place.
It was quite euphoric.

And we did, I think we did great things.
I remember talking to
the people at the Art House.
And I was frustrated
because it took me three years
to build Faith House.

They just said fuck me,
we've been fundraising for ten years
for the Art House,
we're still not there.

I was there twelve years, you know.
We built Faith House, the artists' studios,
all the paths, tramper wheelchairs,
you know we transformed
things like the Dutch barn.

I mean the artists' studios,
they were a fantastic resource.
You know, we did up the ceramics place,
we did the Barn for the office
and the, you know that meeting room at the end,
we did the cottages up,
where my office used to be.

Submission

One of the outstanding examples
of the Holton Lee Open was Sue Austin, you know,
and she, she sent me a piece of work
when she was a student.

It was the fucking underwater wheelchair.
And as soon as I saw it,
I couldn't wait to get the bubble wrap off it,
it was like what the hell is that?

It was a photographic print on aluminium.
And even through the bubble wrap
it blew me away.
Exciting image!

Talking to Sue Austin afterwards,
she said, oh I hesitated to send it in.
You know I didn't think,
you would like it.

And you think Sue, really interesting artist,
lots of confidence
and having a bit of a dilemma
about whether it would play. Fantastic.

And she's gone from strength to strength.

Moving On

I think every five years,
I really sit down and work,
what's the next plan?
What's the next five year plan look like?
And what do I need to do
to get there? And, what,
what's the next five years?

When I get to it,
what's that gonna look like?
So I always do a sort of
life and work planning.

And for me life and work
are one and the same thing.
Everything I've done
I've wanted to do,
I've been really lucky.

But I've also been, it's that,
the more you practice,
the luckier you get sort of argument,
that I've been, I've been quite,
quite, er thoughtful
in setting out a plan of things.
So I knew I wasn't
gonna be at Holton Lee forever.

Building Buildings

You know building buildings
is not something to take on lightly,
it's massively stressful.
And problematical.
And most people build one.
Fuck me, I don't wanna go there again!

I built three, just at Holton Lee.
But I loved it, you know,
working with someone like
Tony Fretton, the architect.

You just learn so much.
Just searching for that knowledge
and learning stuff, I just thrive on that.
And that informs your sculptural practice
when you go back to it.

Shape

I want to go in and invent something,
create something, develop something.
I'm a development worker really.

So that idea of being
a development worker for RADAR,
it was a completely open book.
Develop whatever you want to do
that empowers disabled people.
So I thought, okay, whadda I wanna do?
Access groups, you know, working with
social services, town halls, planners,
that will work.

So at Shape, it was,
what do I want Shape to be
under my directorship, you know,
this is what I want it to look like.

So I had thought
what I wanted it to look like,
and then I set out
to try and achieve that.

So things like Adam Reynolds Bursary,
Shape Open, working with British Council,
building a better relationship with the Arts Council, you know,
working with mainstream galleries in London.

These were all things
that I thought I wanted to do
when I applied for the job.
And they were all things
that we've got on and done.

Handover

I just thought
they'd build the archive,
thought it was a done deal.

We had the architect,
we had the plans in place,
you know we had everything.
I thought everything was in place.

I thought they'd get
a really good director,
because Holton Lee had got ten years,
twelve years track record,
I thought it'd be a really
juicy job for somebody.

I thought somebody interesting'll get the job,
and they'd ring me up
and say Tony, give us a lift with this archive,
and we'd all go down
and we'd build the fucking archive.
And Shape would be involved in that.

And instead they said,
d'you know what,
we don't wanna do this,
it's not part of our agenda any more.
And they killed it.

Sent three hundred and fifty grand
back to the Arts Council.
Fuck me, that's criminal.

Getting Started

I thought visual arts was a niche area
that wasn't being addressed
by any other organisation.
What I really needed to do
was re-establish Shape's credentials in many ways
as a leading disability-led arts organisation.
So it was really important to get
really good artists doing really good work
in really mainstream galleries.
Because that would get us a lot of attention.

And by getting the attention
we could very quickly establish Shape
as a leading visual arts disability-led art organisation.
It was a pretty crude strategy,
but it worked, you know.

So that's what I started to push towards.
Some people on the staff team
thought, yeah, that's a good idea,
that's where we should be going
and some people didn't and they left.

And that's what happens, you know.
You don't get fazed by that.
You just recruit people in
to do the jobs that you want them to do.
And they buy into your vision and off you go.

So the first few months
were certainly months of change and redirection.
And that's, that can be bit rocky,
so you've gotta hold your nerve.
you're not going to be everybody's best friend,
but you know eventually you're going
to move the organisation into a better place.

Bursary

The real catalyst for me
was making the Adam Reynolds Bursary
work in those early days.

Adam had not long died.
He was a personal friend.
So I really wanted to establish
an annual bursary in his name,
because I didn't want,
I didn't want his contribution
to disability arts to be lost.

I don't think it would have been, actually,
but I thought the bursary was a really great way
of continually reminding ourselves
as a disability arts community,

movement, whatever we call it,
of the value that Adam brought to it.
And the fact that he was a huge,
huge loss to what we were trying to achieve.

And I'm really pleased that the bursary's
not only given an opportunity
to some artists who we know,
but it's also given some real opportunity

to artists we'd never ever come across before,
were not part of the disability arts movement.
So it's been a really good vehicle
for bringing in new artists who are good.

It goes from strength to strength.
And part of the strategy is to take it
to different parts of the country,
so it's not always in London and it means that

disabled artists in different regions can get
a better chance from an access point of view.

'Cause not everybody can come
and hang out in London.
It's important that we offer the bursary
to people where, you know

if they wanna travel from home
because they've got a setup
that meets their access needs
then it's important that we can do that.
I think it's been really successful.

The problem with our sector, Allan

The problem with our sector, Allan, is
we light candles and build sort of foundations
then we don't get the critical mass do we,
because Holton Lee's gone off in a different direction.

But if there was a Holton Lee and a Shape
doing what we're doing now and somewhere
three or four different places
doing what we're doing,

if the archive was established
in a building, you know,
it would strengthen
what we're trying to achieve.

'Cause you need great artists,
you need great work
but you also need institutions
to sell and promote that work.

It's very interesting that
whilst we, within disability arts,
see it as a driver,
almost as a life force really,
the rest of the world
just doesn't even know it's there, does it?

Putting It Together

Getting information out to people,
you've got to really hammer it home,
it's got to be simple, straightforward.
So it is, here are good quality artists
bidding for a bursary
in the memory of a really good disabled artist
in a really good contemporary gallery.

You start to put all that together
and you sort of got to be able
to be on a winner, haven't you?
So, just get it established really.

And the thing is,
once you've done it once or twice,
you then start to build
a reputation where you,

you know in the early days I had to go
and knock on people's doors and say,
look, this'll be brilliant, you'll really enjoy it,
it'll be great, don't worry it'll all work,

nothing'll go horribly wrong.
To the point where people are now
coming to us and saying
we'd love to host the Adam Reynolds Bursary.

Which is what you want,
you want galleries to go
d'you know what, we should be hosting this,
cause it's a really good thing.

So that's fab, you know
it's great that that's happening.
And the same with the Shape Open.

Shape Open

What I wanted to do with the Shape Open is say,
well, we've done, we've done high quality good artists,
I mean I always laughingly called the Adam Reynolds,
it's a bit like Turner Prize for disabled artists, you know.

And I think it's up there.
But the Shape Open is aimed
at a different group of artists,
it's opened up, it's really,
though good established artists still
apply and get in, which is great.

I don't want people to think
oh it's only for emerging or young artists,
I don't want people to think that at all.
But it is an opportunity as an open exhibition that,
you know there's a fair chance that work'll get in.

And we get some good work, you know,
the last exhibition, forty-odd, fifty pieces of work,
all I think pretty strong.

The Last Open

It was my swansong, really, going out
and we wanted something political
and also we are in a political time,
when we are back full circle in many ways
to where we were
when you and I were a lot younger.

Going, you know, fuck them
let's get the banners and
let's get these politicians
to realise what they're doing
to us as disabled people.

And I think first time round,
I think we gave them
the benefit of the doubt,
that they hadn't quite cottoned on
to our oppression.

But we can't give them that this time.
They know full well what they're doing
when they're killing disabled people.
Or denying us access to transport
or buildings or jobs or benefits
or whatever it is, you know,
they're doing that knowingly.

It's different,
different kettle of fish now.
But we still seem fairly powerless
to do anything about it.
Which is a worry.
So yes, politics.

In or Out?

We had all those discussions,
didn't we, you know..
Bloody disabled people,
should they be in our gang?

Mental health, is that part of our gang?
You know there was a lot of weird discussion going on.
And that's part of the times, I suppose, isn't it?

And some good rational
and reasoned arguments
about why people should be,
why disability had to broaden.

Because if we were looking at the social model
and we were looking at barriers,
then of course those people from those groups
that were under question,
I mean it's hard to think
we even questioned it or debated it,
so bloody obvious isn't it?

You know, course, of course there are,
you know, they're facing barriers.
Course within the social model,
they're discriminated against,
oppressed.

The Shape of Things

Yeah, I think Shape's in a good place.
But I would say that.
Fortunately I can prove it,
I can point to things that prove it,
I can point to boring things like,
you know the fact that income has gone up,
but I can also point to people
who've done amazing things
because we've supported them.

I just think back
to the wasted opportunities sometimes,
you know the really interesting artists
that were around in those early days
when we were first kicking around
in this disability arts world that
we didn't even really know was a world.

There's some really great talent
that didn't get the investment
to do really interesting work, you know.
Some of them are dead now,
some of them not around,
some of them not doing this kind of work.

Artists like Eddy Hardy
doing amazing things.
Aidan Shingler, you know,
fantastic artist,
you know ten years ago, fifteen years ago
I'd have said he was right up there,
you know top of the pile for me,
very interesting case.
I mean they're always
capable of that great work,
but they just need the investment.

Thoughts on Being a Disability Artist

I make work that I think of
that's interesting to me.
And that resonates with me.
And if other people like it, great.
If they don't, who cares.

And it often has a disability
reference or resonance within it.
Because it's interesting, you know,
it's interesting subject matter.

So, you know
do I make disability arts work?
Well yes.
But not entirely.

Sometimes I do stuff that just interests me
for whatever reason. And it might be work
that's trying to get you to another place,
it is experimental, like stone carving for instance.

Some of my stone carving is definitely
not what you would call disability arts,
but it's more about exploring the medium.
It's experiments.

But some of it absolutely is, you know.
And a couple of marble pieces that I've done,
very much based around disability arts,
like 'Serpent Form'.

'Serpent Form'

Drawn from a conversation with Mike O'Hara,
the visually impaired painter and sculptor,
who I worked with down in Dorset,
down in Holton Lee.

He was talking about losing his sight.
And he was, sort of almost describing,
I can't remember,
almost like watching a snake move.

You can only really watch a snake move
when you get it between two axis points.
So if you watch a snake moving across a field
it's very, you know, just a flat plane,
it's really hard to figure out
how it's moving or how fast it's moving,
it's only when you, cause of the way it moves,
it's not very obvious.

And he was saying
that losing his sight
was this idea of a snake moving,
that you knew, you knew it was happening,
but you didn't know what the rate of travel was.
So you knew you were a bit blinder
than you were three months ago
but you can't actually remember
how blind you were then.

I mean that sounds quite crude
but it was basically that sort of conversation.
And 'Serpent Form' came entirely out of that.
It was this idea of carving the marble
very thinly within the circle of this serpent form.
So you got this quite nice twisty form
which is a beautiful thing to carve in marble.

So it's quite tactile and, and sensual,
you know marble, curved marble that you can stroke
is fucking sexy stuff.

But actually this very thin thing
where you can see this opaque light coming through
and the veins in the marble
is very much like the idea of opaque sight,
trying to see things
through this slightly milky material.

You can see light and shade through it
but very difficult to see,
but when you look at the material
you can see veins in it.
And it's a bit like when you have your eyes tested
and that blinding light goes off
and you see all those veins somehow.

So for me to pack all that into that sculpture,
that's what it's about, that's the end product.
But if you were looking at it
you wouldn't necessarily say, oh it's disability arts.
Unless I told somebody what it was.
You wouldn't know, you'd just,
you'd think it was either a dull or an interesting,
moderately interesting, piece of carved marble.
So it's about the stories as well, disability arts, isn't it?

I think often titles and stories
are really an important part of the package.

Channel Four Commission

I pitched a few ideas at them.
The idea that I thought was the best idea
was not the one they went for.
And that happens, you know, with competitions.

You've got to put three or four ideas together.
And I pitched something called 'Raspberry Ripple',
which is good old rhyming slang for cripple,
in neon. And I thought
that was the strongest piece for it.

I wanted to make something that was
subversive for Channel Four,
but so subversive that they didn't
know it was subversive after it was built.

Cause I think art's got to be dangerous again.
In some way.
Gotta be more than decorative
to be proper disability art.
It's gotta be almost propagandist
or, you know, agitprop
sort of edge to it.

I hadn't got a title for it
when I pitched it to Channel Four.
I had a few ideas what it was gonna be called.
The strongest contender was
'Monument to the Unintended Performer'.

I'd thought if I tell them that,
and tell them what that means,
they won't like it.
So we called it something banal
as a working title.

'Monument to the Unintended Performer'

It was mixing together
this incredibly famous iconic sculpture
by, it's Discobolus,
so it's this Greek discus throwing,
so it's one of the early Olympians.

It's this amazing marble
carved figure of a discus thrower.
That becomes a starting point for it.
So that's iconic of the Olympics.

And the iconic crip image
is the bloody stick wheelchair user,
isn't it, because that's the,
that's the image that is,

you know if you ask people about,
to identify disability,
they'd always say the stick,
you know the stick in the wheelchair.

So I thought well somehow
we've got to amalgamate
the iconic wheelchair logo
and the iconic Greek Olympian.

So it was really just a matter of
crunching those two things together.
But using neon for the wheel
and light for the discus.

And using steel for the body rather than marble.
And stainless steel so that you got
lots of nice reflecting light.
And the figure was very fragmented.

So it wasn't a full figure, it was, you know,
a head, an arm, a bit of a chest.
So there were various bits of body
which were connected
by virtue of the fact that
they were literally bolted on to the Big Four.

So it was a relatively simple mash-up really.
And then, once it was up and done,
I wrote the words, which they more or less hid
in the window round the corner somewhere.

Cause it's called
'Monument to the Unintended Performer',
it's not about the Olympics at all,
not about the Paralympics at all.

And it's a monument
to all the performers
who get stared at every day.
You know, I get stared at all the time.

Getting on a bus,
everybody stares at me.
Somebody walking down the street
with a white cane,

everybody stares at
somebody with a guide dog,
everybody stares if you've got
any sort of facial disfigurement, impairment.
People stare at you.

My Journey

I think part of my journey
has been about making sculpture
in a selfish way.
That's my sculpture for me.

And part of it has been about being able
to administer a series of opportunities
and see other disabled people
who're very creative and very gifted
do great stuff and deliver it.

You know, I mean
I'll always regret the fact
that we've not been able
to achieve more
and we've not been able
to have the influence
that I wanted us to have,

but we are fighting
a sort of faceless minority, aren't we,
of people in power
who don't want us to be
exhibiting in the National Gallery
or the National Theatre or the Tate
or the Hayward Gallery or wherever it is.

Wall of Power

People might say,
well, it's not interesting enough,
it's not important enough.
If it was important,
then people would have heard about it.

But I don't agree.
I think it is important,
I think it's really interesting.
They just don't get it.

I think we've educated the subtle,
you know the white middle classes
to not express that prejudice in open court.
But I think they probably still think it,
a lot of them.
They just know they can't say it any more.

So we're still fighting that,
that wall of power and rank
that don't want us in there.

Because they instinctively know
that it means one of their kind
has to give up their seat at the table.
And they can't hack that at all.