

IN TRANSIT INTERVIEWS: CHARLIE FITZ

Charlie Fitz

Nineteen Forty - 2022

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Celina Loh (CL): You coined the term 'assisted self-portrait' to describe the process of your work. Could you share what that means?

Charlie Fitz (CF): The 'assisted self portrait' is a term I started using to describe a few different ways in which I work. Essentially, they are self portraits which are in different formats — some audio visual, some are photography and some, collage — which have been assisted in some way by someone else, whether that's an active assistant so someone there in the room with me, often my partner taking a photo with my direction, or a passive assistance through archival footage.

I would use photos that someone's taken of me before and recontextualising them into a collage or film. Or I would use archival footage that doesn't relate to me but I relate to them, as a way to represent myself. The point of it is to take the part power back over my own representation and narrative, as well as showing that it can be a collaborative process, which has an element of care within it in which you express how you want to be represented, and someone else listens to you, hears you and plays a role in that. At the heart of it, there's this idea of mutual care and collaboration, which I think is really important as a sick and disabled artist, but also just generally — because it's not just sick and disabled people who need care, we also give care. I think that everyone, to some extent, needs and gives care, and that's kind of what I'm trying to highlight, as well as, the respect for how we represent ourselves.

CL: With the assisted self portrait, your work focuses on the importance of stories, narratives, particularly the representation of people and them being able to speak their own narratives. And in your case, instead of abled individuals speaking for disabled people. Can you share why storytelling is so important to you?

CF: My interest in illness stories is from a theorist called Arthur W. Frank. He wrote a book titled 'The Wounded Storyteller' that is all about illness stories. He looks at the different kinds of stories that are used to describe illness and I relate most to the anti-narrative story. It's still a story but it is chaotic, with no kind of meaning prescribed to it. It doesn't and can't be seen as inspirational or leading towards an end. It happens, it's a story and it takes place. But it's not, you can't fit it into a narrative in the same sense as other types of stories. And that's what I'm interested in. I think the experience of illness for me has destroyed all the narratives that I was living my life by — the idea that I will do this, then this will happen, then that will happen, and I'll reach this point in my life, and all of that has been kind of exploded by illness. And I'm left with these chaotic fragments of experience and trauma, joy and happiness, and all these other things. They're connected by the fact that they're happening to me, and that they're not connected in this kind of like, neat narrative. I guess that is what I've been trying to represent.

CL: In the 'Nineteen forty - 2022' exhibition, you showcased the *Self Assisted Series* (2022) that is a series of 3 videos which explores the trauma of your patienthood and aspects of your own embodiment. At the beginning of your residency with In Transit, within your virtual studio, you mentioned of plans to have four sequences — nerve pain/general pain; anxiety/panic attacks/dissociation; time; and the experience of living beyond your own death. You decided to go with three sequences in the end excluding the panic attack/dissociation, what is the significance of those sequences?

CF: One of the things that kept coming up was when I was making the works was my ability to stay with the topics that I was exploring, in a way in which I still felt like safe and not too triggered by what I was working on. And within that, pushing the boundaries of what I was showing and not being over triggering to other people. I haven't found a way yet to represent the kind of panic attack disassociation experience that I have, in a way that I think I can safely work with and it isn't just going to be absolutely horrific for people to watch. I only want to show those things if I think

that there are things to be learned, not things to be learned from them. I don't think I want to show or explore those experiences until they're ready to be explored. Although.. I think the other thing that I came across was that each one of those films had an element of those (panic attack, dissociative) experiences anyway. So with that experience, I decided to let sit at the top of those films, instead of it having its own entity.

CL: Yes, I see how the dissociative experience is present throughout all three videos as you're watching it because it goes hand in hand with your experience of pain, time and living beyond your own death.

CF: Exactly, and I think that as an experience is not really something that can be separated off from those other things I'm talking about. It is very much a part of it. I think that's why I kind of decided to turn it into three films. Also when I was trying to work on that, I found myself getting very much like, 'I don't want to look at this anymore. I don't want to work on this thing.' So it made me think I wasn't ready to just focus in on that just yet, and that it was better translated in a different way. I think it worked out in the end and I thought it was good that it turned out as three instead of four - there's always a thing about triptychs...

CL: Seeing how your work deals a lot with your chronically ill/disabled experience, would you consider your work to be disabled activism?

CF: Yes and the reason that I would is in the context the 'sick woman theory' by Johanna Hedva. It is the act of showing care to myself, trying to represent my experience and trying to show care to those around me, and trying to make a kind of community that relate to these experiences, or can share and bear witness to each other's experiences. It is not changing laws and I think I've thought a lot about whether I'm an activist or not.

I think that I can use the tools that I have and the voice that I have within art, creativity and academia to create a cultural kind of activism, which I think is really important. It is something that a lot of people are doing in which we are making space for certain experiences and not letting them go unseen and unrecorded, as well as, helping other people realise what they're doing is important, and that their voice is important in these spaces.

CL: And it works because it's a very subtle, it doesn't shout which makes one contemplate further about their privileges in a very visceral manner.

Going back to the *Self Assisted Series* (2022), you used a lot of archival footage and stock images within it. You mentioned the work to be a passive self portrait, so why have you deliberately chosen to make it passive, instead of an active self portrait?

CF: I think it's in relation to how I understand the world. One of the ways in which I understand the world is through cultural history, although I'm not a historian. In my medical humanities studies, I look a lot at history, but more towards the perception of history. So what ideas and concepts have stuck with us historically, particularly in medicine. Or how women or disabled people, or certain groups of people are perceived and treated in society. Through those studies is how I've understand my experience of illness, disability and healthcare, particularly why I am perceived in and experience things in certain ways. Even how I act — I've been conditioned to speak and act in a specific manner sometimes and I find it easiest to understand all these things through the history of medicine and culture, and how things have come to be.

CL: So you use archives as a self-inquiry tool to understand history, your experiences and the wider world. I find it interesting that archives, at first view, can be perceived to be linear but it isn't. It is usually filed chronologically but when used within the videos, they start to resist all these narratives.

Your work creates quite an interesting dialogue with Pablo's video 'Madrid 1940' within the *Nineteen Forty-2022* exhibition in that it makes me think a lot about archival silence - whose stories are being told, whose are being taught and whose stories are filtered out. Who is in power? You have all these archives but there are still limited resources with the representation of disabled people.

CF: This is why I say I'm not necessarily interested in history. I'm sure that historians would hate me for saying this but I'm not interested in the historical accuracy. I am interested in the things that seeped out of history - whether they are true or not, whether they are based off the back of something true or whether they are just how things have developed over time. I guess I am interested in the history of ideas instead of, 'this definitely happened'.

this is kind of why I say that I'm not like, interested in necessarily history. And I'm sure that historians would hate me for saying this. But I'm not really interested in like, historical accuracy. I'm interested in the things that the like, things like seeped out of history, the idea whether they're true or not, whether they're based off the back of something true, or whether they're just how things have developed ideas that have developed, like I'm interested in, like, I guess, the history of ideas, maybe more so than, like, this definitely happened. And you're more interested in how like, How can I put this without sounding what is the accuracy of archives say, um, like, you know, this has happened, but, you know, over time, the facts have changed, and like, the representation has changed whatsoever and how that yeah, that gradual change and how that came about and stuff.

CL: So how that gradual change came about to lead to what we know today.. Speaking of what we know.. You have always integrated access within your life from your day-to-day, to your artistic practice and academia work. How has In Transit's residency and accessibility training further informed and supported you in terms of artistic development?

CF: I learned a lot about access, in particularly digital accessibility. Although I'm interested in accessibility, I find that there is a lot of misinformation out there. Before this, when I was teaching myself, I would make so many mistakes. It is useful to have a few people guiding you and doing it with you, particularly Andy and yourself who were really good authorities in the subject and would always ask other people with specific specialisms if you were unsure. To have that, I learned a lot of the ways in which I was doing wrong, as well as a lot of things that I didn't know about. From a practical perspective, I know that my digital accessibility is better. From a non practical point of view, it is energising to see so many people putting access at the centre of their practice, particularly with some of the people involved since it is not something that necessarily, directly impacts them. I find that so important because you don't get that as much, so it produces a really good environment to be working in.

CL: Thank you, that's lovely to hear. To wrap up, what do you hope the audience takes away from your videos?

CF: I guess I don't really have any intended way to them to experience it. Perhaps an interest in the experiences of sick and disabled people - not just my experience because they are all different and unique. So if someone's life is not intertwined with that of sickness and disability, I hope the videos would stimulate an interest in it (sickness and disability) or creatives who are making work about it.