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Woman's Voice: From DisArt, It's DIStopia.

Rock music playing

Chris: Hi folks. Welcome back to the DIStopia Podcast. This is your co-host Chris Smit....

Jill: ...and Jill Vyn

Chris: and we're back.

Jill: We're back and we're glad to be back. I hope you enjoyed the last episode with Tom di Maria and we're excited to be bringing our current one with Brian Catling.

Chris: Brian Catling who, actually, we met in 2015. He was part of an exhibition that we were involved in during our first festival which was a long time ago. But Brian blew our mind. Is it fair to say that?

Jill: Yeah, I would think it's fair to say that Brian is a multi-talented multifaceted person that is, you just are lucky enough to be in his presence.

Chris: Well, I think too even for this 45 minutes that we hung out with him, I felt like we had learned something. I felt like we had been challenged. I thought that we had challenged him. It was just a really unique experience and I hope people will hear that in our discussion.

Jill: If you want to learn more about the ways that Brian was involved in the exhibition, you can go to our website [DisArtNow.org](http://DisArtNow.org) and on the website there are both two of his sculptures that are in the exhibition. We also included his performance piece. Just a brief review of that performance that

was incredible and as you talk about blowing our minds and educating us and keeping us entertained all in one. We hope you enjoy that brief video.

Chris: Well and it's really a way to see what he does best and it seems like he is so willing to give his own self to this art and so watching that will hopefully give you a sense of that. So, here's our conversation with Brian Catling and we hope you enjoy it.

[Music plays]

Chris: Brian Catling, thank you for joining us at DIStopia Podcast and thanks for being part of this exhibition that we're talking about Process and Presence: Contemporary Disability Sculpture. We all met in 2015 for Art of the Lived Experiment and you were here with a whole bunch of folks for that. We have fond memories of that.

Brian: Yes, so do I.

Chris: Do you remember that performance and do you remember that experience? What do you remember from that?

Brian: The first thing I remember was the space was completely different than I imagined because whenever I made it in Liverpool it was a very different space and the work fit into it in a different kind of way. Then you recount, you redesign, you remake. That's what I love about doing it. I don't normally take the same piece to more than one location. I prefer to make a new piece each time but when it's like this, it means I can. So some things were cut out. Some things were added. I kind of find my way into it bit by bit. Then when then when it sets, it set. Of course, all the problems are technical and all my machines are all controlled by 250 volts. That was a surprise, they just didn't work (laughs).

Chris: So is it part of the work itself then that sort of rethinking or recalibrating for every space? Do you think about that as you make the performance or do you let that sort of happen organically? And we'll get around to the performance that you did here at Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture. But just thinking about the origins of your performance which are very powerful. If you could talk a little bit about that...

Brian: I never rehearse. The only thing I plan are the technical things, the kind of triggers. If I want a piece of machine to work or I want an apparatus to work, it will work. If it doesn't, you have to improvise on that. Everything else is invented at the time. More importantly I think to the audience, something I've been thinking for a long time is that the audience feed and influence the work and it's something to do with their presence, the way they pay attention or don't pay attention and I think I adjust to it. I think I adjust to it emotionally as well. I don't know how I do that and it sounds a bit like I'm talking (indiscernible) phenomena. I don't think I am it. It's something even musicians, even a conductor can gauge an audience with his back to them. It's something that audiences as a collective. I think if you're open enough they'll speak to you and they can help guide the work. I sometimes make a durational piece over 16 days where I've done 8 hours every day. So it can't be alike each day but I know it's changed by the people coming into the room. So the pieces that occur over an hour or over 15 minutes or something like that, they're more compressed. But it's important that I'm not there when I do it. Once I go into the thing, if I become aware of myself it stops and it simply can't continue.

Jill: Last night you performed in the Conservatory at Meijer Gardens. It would be great to have you explain kind of the setup and the process of getting to the performing and then I'm very interested in the energy that you talk about because there were two guests that we spoke with the gallery after the performance and they were to your back most of the time, yet they expressed this sense of energy that I thought was very interesting. Without

them knowing specifically what you were doing, they were impacted by the work.

Brian: Yeah. Let's talk a bit about preparation first. When I know what the place is; sometimes I don't always know what it is. When it's as specific as this and I realized that I really wanted to be in the conservatory, that big, very high greenhouse. I realized I had the opportunity to make something that stretched into it. I knew it was short in time. It was only 15 to 20 minutes, the performance. But I thought if I could reach out in some other way, actually reaching into the space and I quite liked the idea that that would be a surprise to the audience.

So, I used a telescoping tube that went up and up and up and it was 9 meters high and it almost touches the top of the roof. So I had a device. It was a simple device in the center. I have to start by making the thing. I make it in the studio or I make it at home or I make it in my head. It's often a machine or device. I bring it along and I go to the space and then I have no idea what I'm going to do with it and I start to do it. In this case it was a crutch. It was bandaged and it turns, after some manipulation, into something that looks like a microscope. So that was the simple part of it. I make it to be carried over and to be disguised and then everything else from there is invented. I don't sleep much before then. I dream about what I'm going to do. I don't remember my normal dreams at all but dreams about work or ways of imaging what it might be.

Jill: How much can you tell what the audience is doing in terms of trying to figure out what it is that you're doing because we all try and make sense of things? How much last night did you feel that from the audience or the intrigue or the curiosity from the audience?

Brian: I think the thing I tune into is something made of all of those things and it's like a kind of magnetism. It pulls you and if it's going well it pulls and it pulls some more. If it doesn't go well, it repels. It actually pushes you

back. When it pushes you back it breaks down their concentration and they start to fidget and you know they're not with you. That's without looking at them. Even though they're very close, I'm not looking at them. Even sometimes when I'm staring at their faces, I'm not actually seeing them. I'm looking through them. But something else is opened. And last night was very very active. You could tell by the sound. You could tell by the concentration. People concentrating and the fact they might be baffled I love because I'm going to be baffled as well. I'm not giving a sermon. I'm making a situation for them to interpret or making a poem for them to suffer and enjoy. I'm not preaching at any level at all. It's not a simple A to B statement. There's lots of things in it which often I don't know what they are either.

Chris: You know you mentioned suffering and enjoyment which is sort of a brilliant dichotomy of art itself. Is that something that you've worked on in your other work; not only your performance but your sculpture and your writing?

Brian: I think it's something I live. I think it's those two poles. That's the first time I said that. I didn't realize I said that until you said it back. They're also guardians and they're guides. They tell you when something is right and the balance between it. So I don't want people to be comfortable. I'm not an entertainer. I don't want to be uncomfortable. I don't want to make them positively uncomfortable because I'm not there to humiliate or to change their opinion. It's something in between. It's where we're both going, "I don't know what this is" and we're both trying to understand it. I'm locked in what I'm doing, completely in what I'm doing. I'm not there. That's very important. Sometimes, it's a kind of technical thing and I've got the thing in my hand. Sometimes these things come alive. There's no other way of explaining them. The piece of wood I've got with me I think is one thing turns into something else. It becomes alive and I think I show that. It's what you said before about emotions, people picking up emotions. I think what happens is they become rawer and rawer as the work goes on. Especially

in these short pieces. I don't hold it back and I don't act it. I couldn't act. They'd be telling me I'm a terrible actor but I just let something else come. I just let it go. They're the kind of things that most of us all the time don't let go. They're the kind of things that we refine and control and deal with because we're dealing with a kind of known civilized world as it's rules. In the 15 minutes if you say those rules don't apply but the notion of communication does then it allows something else to come through to communicate.

One of the men last night, maybe the one you spoke to, is a man called James who has something to do with music, I think. He said at one point he welled up. He was at my back. I know what he meant, but I don't know how I did that and I don't know which is the bit he felt so strongly. He had no problems saying it. So, it wasn't like a trespass into his emotional territory. In some ways I think I invent an emotional territory which is large enough for all those people to be part of. Maybe that's what's radiated. I don't know because I don't have control of it.

[music plays]

Chris: At the end of the performance, you hand off your tool to an audience member and that's when I welled up. Because for me that was that such clear message that you had gone through, like you said, this sort of sorrow and promise of art and then it's not yours anymore.

Brian: Yeah. I mean, that is certainly part of it. I've made pieces before where I then ended the control over to someone else or I've given the hold and walked away so they're no longer audience. They're witness and they're almost party to it, a part that's starting again. Last night was like that, but it was also because it was tottering. So the 9 meter rod wasn't being held in place. See, these things all happen at once. So, I thought, "If I walk away, that could fall" and that isn't the image I want and I don't want it to land on someone. So that's going on at the same time I go "ahhh". So I

grabbed the lady's hand and just pulled her up and gave her the thing to hold. The moment she holds it my responsibility is gone and I disappear. Then the audience are looking at her, poor thing. (laughs)

Jill: I spoke to her after and she happens to be a dancer or has experience dancing so she that anytime someone holds out a hand you take it. For her to be in that position, while she took it, it was also somewhat uncomfortable for her. We did stay there after you left. You may see in the video. We did stay there silent. I don't know what everybody else was thinking, but I was thinking, "You've just given us a chance to continue your performance." You invited us into something and each of us had an opportunity to reflect.

Brian: It's also maybe not my performance. Maybe it never was. Maybe it's theirs, those that were there. Maybe that's the performance. With hand gestures they are very true. I use my hands a lot. A couple times I've used them consciously. There's one thing I did that terrified people and it's so simple and it is the same sort of thing. I would put my hand out like this as if to shake hands. The person would immediately come forward and I'd do that. It's the sign of a cobra. My hand is now held in a cobra which is the exact opposite to shaking hands. It's a position of strike and I would dissolve and move away and they would be petrified. They would be literally held in that position that some call NPO. I'm not very good at anagrams. Neuro-something processing which deals with those kind of movements. Conjurers use them, stage people use them all the time. I only did this two or three times. It got all quiet; everyone else would move but that person would be standing still. They're actually held by shock to that point and that was really quite severe. It wasn't quite what I wanted to do (laughs).

Jill: She welcomed that invitation. It felt like an invitation and then after a few minutes (laughs), you could tell she was uncomfortable yeah and so, I went in and I think because of my role people were like "Oh, you're cleaning up", but I felt like I was able to do my own performance. I twisted it

down. It was very wonderful. I mean, she appreciated it and we could just continue and it felt very beautiful and, like I said, people would interpret that differently, "Oh, she's cleaning up". But it wasn't that at all for me. It was more of an invitation into I think the community that we talk about in the gallery and in the exhibition. You were, for me, you were showing with that microscope. I thought of it as a little viewing that you would see in New York City. So just just a different lens. A Disability lens and thinking about the potential because for me it shifted from that to the potential that there is in people that we don't always see because that telescoping lens that you had and you twisted and twisted and it went higher and higher. We had no idea when you started that that was within the structure that you brought. Everybody has a different interpretation but, for me, that was powerful because I've been working so closely with the exhibition so my mind probably went into the different themes that we've been talking about of Disability identity and community and support.

Brian: I mean to keep those ideas open, to keep the possibility and interpretation open is very important. It's very important that the work tells its own story and that's coming from the audience, it's coming from the room, it's coming from the moment. Just to go back about those gestures and things. I sometimes use gentility which is a really strange thing to say because it is. You can't imagine what is. Because parents do they know what exactly what it is. But someone my size who is doing something very odd. It can appear to be threatening sometimes. It can change very quickly by one action of gentleness towards someone in the audience. It can be a tiny, tiny movement but it can shift the entire thing. So it's not a device or a series of devices I have to use. I suppose that it's there in a way because I know things work like that. But it will sometimes just come about by itself and I think it's brought on by that person or it's brought on by somebody in the audience. So I shift it away from where I thought I was going completely and then the work changes. That's what I meant about the work being not directed but being influenced magnetically by the audience which is a collective being. It's its own thing.

Chris: I felt like your performance in the greenhouse was even accentuated not only by the people but also by the foliage and by the birds and the things that were in there. Were you aware of that in your performance?

Brian: I was aware of the birds. I knew what was happening. We trespassed their time. This is a time when most people have gone and the place is empty and they're started to sing the famous bird song, "I am here. This is where I live." They don't want other people there for that so they get louder (laughs). But it's kind of a magical sound. There was a wind in there. I think from machines. There was something blowing on the foliage and the light!. I mean I was aware of the light changing. All those things are kind of a beginning and the end and when I made it it's one total thing.

[music plays]

Chris: We know your work through the context of disability and we also know that your work has many different contexts; many different avenues and platforms that it goes out to. Disability only really being one of them and I'm just so curious how that has been for your work now twice, at least, in our understanding, maybe others as well. But, twice being associated with that Disabled culture and the Disabled identity. When we put the exhibition together, you were very close to the top of our list and I remember our email correspondence and you were very blunt and you said, "Look, I don't know if identify in the way you need me to but obviously the work speaks to the experience." I just want to let you talk about that.

Brian: I just didn't want to be a fraud. It's so deep and there's so many parts. The most obvious part of me which has a different relationship toward other people is my stutter. But that's only part of it. Ever since I was a child, I've always been interested and attracted to drawn to things that were not quite the same as everything else, especially people. I work with Disabled people or I've worked for Disabled people and that image exists in all of my work, exists in the writing, exists in the video pieces, certainly

exists in performances. I think it's in the sculpture as well. I don't inject it in as a kind of element. It's just deeply inside me. I remember at the conference in Liverpool. I was at the back of the room. The first thing that someone said on stage is, "that there are only two kinds of people in the world. Disabled and the not disabled yet." And I thought, "Well, you can't argue with that." So, I'm probably in the middle (laughs). I sometimes work with the DNAD an organization that looks out for creative people in the advertising industry and other things and I go in and I do a little class where I refresh your imagination. A couple of times they've asked me to work with other people because they wanted an awareness of disability. So, I do a class with people and I ask them to become Disabled. But, at the same time, I ask them to do something else. In very simple terms it's got to be physical. It's not a mental idea. It's about words. I bring materials and I cover the table with materials and I ask people to attach this to somewhere on their body that will make that movement, that part of the body change. But, at the same, it's got to extend their personality. So, there's two things happening. One thing is something being changed in movement but that's not enough. It's also got to be an extension of their personality. At the beginning people scratch their heads and they don't want to until they pick up the materials and then suddenly you are walking around the table and the things that come out of it are quite extraordinary. The clients will say, "What is this?" It's not a competition. There are no prizes for this. I just want you to look and talk about what you've just done. And so, it's not the subject. It's kind of the experience. It's also kind of like the experience. I'm also very much interested in fiction. Always. One of the things I do, I don't it anymore is I talk about the face and I explain that there's a film especially now more than ever. There's prosthetics on film to make different creatures, to make humans look different. It's enormous. You can buy comics on it now. You can buy fan magazines on how to do this. People are dying to look at these images, these different faces until someone walks into the room whose actually got one and then they don't know what to do. And I say, "Why?" We're going to work on this. "It's not just you. But why? We're going to really think about this because it's a reflection, not

about anyone else. It's a reflection of us and it's a reflection of our desire and our need and some bit of it is wrong somewhere but it's back to front." I haven't found a solution yet but it gets people talking about it very quickly.

Chris: We come in contact with people who try to have Disability awareness activities for companies or for organizations and they do what we call is this "try on a disability" and what's missing from what that usually is is the part where you said let that added limitation be an extension of your personality because without it, it simply becomes tourism. So, that's an interesting idea.

Brian: It's the "No, you've only done one part. Where's the other part?" I could say, "Well, I can't do that anymore." That's not very interesting. But what can you do that you couldn't do (indiscernible) Last week, these things are all happening at once. These things happen to you that way. The head of the arts of BBC contacted me. He's writing a book on stuttering because he's come to a belief that there's something in stuttering that can produce a certain kind of creativity. So, we talked about it and I haven't thought about it that way. I said, "I think maybe we just produce an alternative," because you know there are certain words you know you can't say. You have to find other ones. Sometimes you get a word you think you can say and you can't so you've got to find another one. So, you're looking. Where most people would say five words in a line. If you get stopped you've got ten words on either side of it. So, you're building these vocabularies which is actually kind of more fluent but it's not the thing you wanted to say in the first place. (laughs)

Jill: It is interesting. We talk about disability leading to living more creative lives. It seems that you're touching on that. There's an artist Neil Marcus in the show and he has a video Disabled Country and he is a person of many words spoken in only a few. And I think of that when you think about language, in particular, of how do you communicate more creatively or

more succinctly, in his case. Or other people who have stories about how they live their lives in more creative ways. I think of people with Dyslexia.

Brian: Yeah, I have that too.

Jill: So, it seems, what I have been learning, is a lot people end up going in the creative fields and it would be very interesting, maybe because you have that experience, to speak on other learning disabilities or identified disabilities that... Is it that people go into creative fields because it's harder to do something else or is there something more there?

Brian: No, I don't think it's because it's harder. Because I think people who grow up with those things, tackle them. So avoidance is not necessarily an issue ever because you tackle it the moment you think about it. The moment you take on someone else's understanding ??? 30:26 of it. I think you deal with alternatives. Especially in a school yard you're finding alternatives to not be heard. You find alternatives to fight back. And, I think, it doesn't make you smarter it makes you a little bit more streetwise in a different street because they're all going to stay in the same street and they're going to stay in it all their lives and we're actually becoming streetwise in a street that we're imagining because that's the best place to be.

[music plays]

Jill: Something you said earlier about your performances and how you lose yourself and I find it fascinating when you talk about that in the same respect of when you write and you told the story the other day. He told the story of how he's writing and you'd be like (increasingly animated) "Ooh, wow, I didn't know the character was going to do that right now." You can say it better but that's just fascinating.

Brian: But I didn't say it, I showed it to you.

Jill: You showed it to me with your...

Brian: No, no. I showed it to you with my hands.

Jill: Oh, yeah! You showed me your hands.

Brian: Because the giveaway in saying that doesn't make any sense. But what I did and I'll try to tell you. Is I put my hands on my imaginary keyboard and the hands are clicking (sounds of fingers on the table typing) and I go, "He didn't. He didn't. He didn't." And that's how I write. I get to the end of it and sit back and wind it back and it's there. I'm not sure how people do that. I don't know where it's coming from. It could be part of this.

Jill: It could be part of your performance practice. It's coming out in another way.

Brian: I wrote and published poetry for a long time, but I never thought I could write prose. And so I started writing when I was 61. But perhaps that's part of the stutter thing when you think about it because it's that kind of speech that I'm going to get stuck on. I mean, I could read poetry and I'm never going to get. In fact, I don't read anything that I don't stutter on most things. Poetry. Never. But prose sometimes so perhaps the prose has been put off for that reason. I don't know. I took 61 and I could finally get it. It finally happened. I explain this to people and they say "What was the cathartic experience?" I say, "I think it's called laptop." Because suddenly there was this mechanism, this machine that made it possible. And I think they do and I think that's what's happened and thank God it's happened in what's left of my lifetime because it's made a difference.

Chris: What I like about what you're saying is there's always been a very striking relationship between the different body or mind and technology and how those things work together to make value or to make meaning. So

that's a really interesting way to think and I think if you look at some of the work in the gallery you'll see that too in Carl Hendrickson's chair, for example, from Creative Growth. That's a chair that he created as a technology, as a tactic to make his life happen in a way that's valuable and meaningful and so it's really interesting to hear you talk about that.

Brian: You know I think also the stilt legs which are beautiful things. Without knowing you can still know. I think I know because I'm a maker. The way they're made is very very special. Both by the kind of consideration of thought and the application but, also, in the dream of what they are. In the imagination before they're shaped because it's still there in one object. Sometimes things get divorced. There's a lot of sculptors whose work is made by other people for sculptors who have made the same thing over and over and over again and it's often a big lump of stuff that's got no vibration to it. Those things are alive. Those things are tangibly alive to me. And they're not the only things in there. The Judith Scott's have always been that. Their presence is extraordinary. I remember seeing photographs and I got it. But I didn't get it until I saw one and then, "Oh my God". It's like that. This is in the presence of an object. This is the presence of personality and you read it and it's easy to read and if you all you have to do is turn off some of the other conditioning switches off and there it is.

Jill: So, when you're talking about this. The artists that you're mention, Lisa Bufano and Judith Scott, and yourself, I can't help but the word vulnerability comes to mind as an artist. As I child growing up were you comfortable with that vulnerability always?

Brian: I've never been intimidated in my own vulnerability. I don't know why. I know a lot of people are. I think it's encouraged. I think a lot of people encouraged me to feel intimidated because I think it's a control mechanism. I suppose I always felt a bit separate from that. So you have that choice of whether getting back on the road, their road, or making damn sure you never do. I think once you've made that decision then it's, you use

everything. And so the vulnerability is something I kind of... Someone once said to me when I was an obnoxious brat when I was a student, "Don't use your personality like a teddy bear; use it like a power drill." And that sounds like a facistic way of saying it, but it's actually true. And I think it's the same thing. If you use your vulnerability that way you actually got a tool for communication. You got a tool that can actually make things in a different way. Because it's not there to be hugged and demonstrated, it's there to be used. I'm making this up as I go along. I mean it sounds like it...

Jill: Just like your performance and your book. (all laugh) We've come to expect that from you, Brian.

Brian: (laughs) Some of it might be true.

Jill: You'll have to think about that. So, are there things that you still keep for yourself though?

Brian: No, because it's all attached to work ethic. It's all about making and going forth. What I can't do is transcendental reflection. There's not a space in that for me. I can't. There's no space for me to chant. There's no space for me to sit and ponder on the things that I do. I can't do it. I'm not wired that way. I'm wired to gush and that's what I do. So, I suppose being alone is the thing I keep for myself. That's probably the only thing I keep for myself.

Chris: Well, thank you so much for your time.

Brian: My pleasure. My pleasure.

Chris: And for being part of this exhibition and we look forward to seeing what erupts next.

Jill: So, thank you.

Brian: Thank you.

[music plays]

Chris: So, that was Brian Catling. It's nice again to hear his voice. I love his voice. Just the way he talks. You know, I could listen to him for a long time.

Jill: Yeah, it kind of stays in your head. In a good way.

Chris: And he's really tapped into the ways that creativity and disability are linked. In ways that we've always believed but it's so nice to be able to hear him talk about that in different ways.

Jill: One thing I want to bring attention to is that DisArt has been working on really solidifying what our mission is and our current, and I say current, because you know as a young organization we are evolving. I want to share this because it's something we're testing out and we think it's working.

So DisArt is a nonprofit organization that believes that expressions of a Disabled cultural identity can transform society from awareness to understanding to belonging, creating a community that enjoys the full and equitable participation of all Disabled people.

Chris: Mmhmm. And I think what we're trying to do there, Jill, I mean correct me if I'm wrong but this idea of a minority experience or of a cultural expression. That's the real turning point for us. Is trying to get folks to understand disability as a cultural identity and once you do that it's pretty easy to do some of the work that we're trying to do.

Jill: Well, I wouldn't say easy. I think Disability culture and the ideas are complex. That's something we've talked about from the beginning is how,

on one hand, it seems simple but once you dive in there's so much complexity and that takes us back to Brian. He's a complex person but has so much to offer. So we appreciate Brian and we appreciate all of you for tuning in this time.

Chris: That's right. Stay tuned for the next episode where we're going to talk to artist, Sandie Yi, who is also in the Process and Presence exhibition. Her work is as equally as striking as Brian's so until next time, this is Chris Smit...

Jill: And Jill Vyn.

Chris: We'll see ya.

[music plays]

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