

Compass Festival Podcast Transcript

Episode 2: Sick and Tired with Demi Nandhra, Amahra Spence, Toni-Dee Paul and Suriya Aisha

Elle Money

music and drums play Hello, welcome to the Compass Festival Podcast. If you didn't already know Compass Live Art is the driving force behind the biennial Compass Festival. We present playful and interactive encounters across the city of Leeds in all kinds of places and spaces. Previously, we've held many evil animal trials collected 1000 stranger's handshakes in clay, and even let a chicken answer your innermost questions.

Normally, we bring all these projects together in a 10 day festival, but this year, we're spreading them out over 2021. And, to give you a taste of what to expect, for the next four weeks, we'll be chatting to artists, makers and local folk all about the themes of concerns of some of our upcoming projects. This week, we spoke to Demi Nandhra, along with panel Toni-Dee Paul, Amahra Spence and Suriya Aisha, to discuss protest, mental health and the energy it takes to survive, endure, resist and have hope against it at all.

Pam Johnson

Guys, welcome. It's such a pleasure to be in the space with you. So for all our listeners, I am Pam Johnson. My background is I've been in the creative sector for over 30 years. I can't believe that I'm saying that. But yeah, for over 30 years, I was a dancer, a professional dancer with DV8 physical theatre, and then spent 10 years with Phoenix Dance Company here in Leeds, where I was one of 10, one of four women actually to be introduced to the company for the first time. I retired at the age of 30. And then had to find another job as is the case often in the creative industries. And so I went into dance administration and outreach work. So working with a company called Kakuma Dance Theatre in Birmingham, and then later with the Northern School of Contemporary Dance where I lead their outreach programmes. And then in 2003, I joined the Arts Council, where I spent five years in Manchester as the Dance Officer, and then five years in Yorkshire as the relationship manager dance. And then my last six years with the Arts Council were in London, as Senior Relationship Manager, where I worked with all the local authorities. I worked with a dance portfolio and with combined art, but I'm really, really, really pleased that the last two years have found me back home in Leeds, working for Leeds City Council where I am head of

cultural development. And one of the greatest blessings is that that role brings me into a space with you artists. Can we introduce ourselves? This session is going to be led by Demi Nandhra. So Demi, could you lead the introductions?

Demi Nandhra

Hello, I'm Demi Nanda. And I just quickly describe myself I... Don't worry, Pam! We'll get to you! It's all right!

I've got long black hair, and I'm wearing a neon jumper. And I am sitting in my living room with some nice lip gloss on. So I'm Demi I am an artist from Birmingham. I'm a live art and performance artist and a writer. I never used to call myself a writer. And then I got an agent and then I was like I can call myself a writer!. I mean... No, that's sounds really weird to be like, you can only claim... anyway...! I'm just validating myself but I'd be like, okay, you can call yourself a writer. I am based in Birmingham. I make work a lot about trauma, mental health, they're very autobiographical works. I like to look and focus on people that look like me, that are marginalised and I'm really obsessed with how we've been brought up and how that kind of shapes our adulthood and our relationships and our intimacy and vulnerability and all the things that I want to have a do over in my 20s into my 30s. That's me! Thanks! If I can give it over to Toni-Dee Paul.

Toni-Dee Paul

My name is Toni-Dee. I am a 25 year old Black woman with my hair tied up. I'm currently wearing an orange t shirt, gold hoop earrings and a gold necklace with a Taurus symbol on it, because I am if anything stereotype of a Taurus! I am wearing pink glasses that have flowers on the side and I am sat in my bedroom in North Manchester. My accent is what I would call Northern, because I'm from the city of Leeds. I am an artist, a performer, a maker, I'm also sometimes a dramaturg, and someone who helps people think through ideas.... And I don't really have a title for that yet. So I just call it that. And it means I sit in rooms with other artists and talk about stuff. And sometimes I invite other artists to come into my rehearsal rooms and talk about stuff. I make performance that's not just for theatre. So, I make performance that sometimes situates itself in cemeteries, refugee centres, kitchens, and sometimes just the street. And then occasionally, it's in theatres. And I make usually autobiographical solo work, usually about memory, but explores race, disability, gender and queerness. And I've been doing that for about six years, which feels really bizarre to say, because it kind of feels like I've been exploring those things all my life. But I guess I've only had a platform for in the last six years. And I like to make work that centres, as Demi said

so eloquently, people that look like me. People who have been marginalised by society that disables them in one way or another. And I'm really honoured to be here today with this incredible lineup of people. I'm very gassed. I'm going to pass it to Suriya.

Suriya Aisha

Hey everyone. I'm Suriya. I am a Black woman. I'm wearing glasses. And I've got kind of... Oh, they're past my shoulders now! Shoulder length dreadlocks... apparently they've grown in the lockdown. Um, yes. So and I'm wearing a black t shirt, and I'm sitting in my office in at home. And I am an artist and organiser and activist. I write and I make work that tell stories of the everyday, of marginalised people. So that might be the intersections of being black and queer, or a person of colour and queer. Being a person again, like Toni said, who's disabled by society, or I really like enjoy telling stories about kind of the humaneness of people and shining a light on the stories of those who are often unheard. As an organiser, I founded a network called Unmuted for LGBT People of Colour in Birmingham. And recently, I'm co director of Colours Youth Network, which is a organisation that works with young LGBT People of Colour. So I feel like as an artist, my work, I've kind of owned the idea that facilitation is also part of my artistry, in the ways that I approach spaces and curate atmospheres and with people, as well as like writing and doing traditional work in theatres and stuff like that. So I'm really excited to talk to you all today about rest, about reclaiming those kind of things, because those themes pay a big part in the work that I do and in the ways that I want to do work and the ways that I want to make people feel held in the work and the organising that I do. And so yeah, I'm just really, really, really, really excited to talk to you all today and explore that together. And... Amahra, the amazing Amahra! Oh,

Amahra Spence

Hello, everybody! My name is Amahra Spence, and I'm a young ish, young ish, *laughs* Black woman with big ass gold hoops on wearing a sandy coloured top, surrounded by the artwork of Chizzy and Paula Varjack in the background. I am an artist who primarily makes work with text and installation. And I'm also a cultural practitioner. And I claim the title Spatial Practitioner. Because I feel like space in all of its context sort of underpins a lot of my work, and particularly spatial justice. In 2013, I founded an Arts and Social Justice organisation called MAIA. And through that, we've birthed an incredible space as of last year called Yard, which is the first phase of.. I can't believe I get to say this out loud... but like the first phase of an artist led hotel, that is really rooted in, you know, how do you create from the precedents that aren't the theatres as they are, that aren't the galleries as they are, but how do you create from the precedents that give us joy. So Abuelos and Yard are very much

the idea of recreating the spirit of my grandfather's home, within an art house and a residency space. And in the case of Abuelos within a hotel. So we've been on this journey. I'm really excited to speak with you all, because I'm moved incredibly by each of you as people just as much as your practices. So..Wagwan everybody!

Pam Johnson

Fab! And, because I forgot to do so, I am a Black woman wearing spectacles, I won't show off and tell you the brand. But I'm also wearing a black Polo neck sweater, which I wear quite a lot, and a grey cardigan.

But just to lead us into this conversation today. I mean, the catalyst, I guess, for us coming together in conversation is a work that you've created Demi, called 'I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired'. And so I kind of want to use that to lead us into to just further investigation and exploration of all of your work(s). Because I'm really struck by that as a title. It's, I think, like no other time, everybody can find truth in, "I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired". So Demi, what's your truth in that?

Demi Nandhra

I just want to say on the title, it comes from Fannie Lou Hamer, who was an American civil rights activist. And when I first kind of heard that, I suppose, 'I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired' It felt like it just went through generations. And it just went and even though it has a completely focused context, right, and it has an American context and to the injustices, especially in Mississippi, when Fannie Lou Hamer was lobbying and was an activist for more civil rights in Mississippi. What's interesting is that then, for some bizarre reason, that saying became like an Anastasia, do you remember that artist? She's got a song called 'I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired', and it's about love, and men! And I'm like, what?! Like, and I just, I really, really like that, because I like the idea of when words lose their meanings and where words lose the, especially when it comes to Black women, where their words will be reappropriated. And for me taking the words and putting it on this weird project that I'm still, I'm not sure about. And that's why it kind of went down to just 'Sick and Tired'. Because I didn't feel it was appropriate. And I'm still grappling with that. I don't know what that is, but it just feels like so that's why it's very important. Every time I talk about it is this is where it comes from. Right. It's not something that is come from my head. 100% not, and it's definitely not come from the pop star Anastasia. Yeah. She had a good voice though! And so Pam, did you say what was my truth to that?

Pam Johnson

So yeah, what's your truth in that? So, you know, just reflecting on on the journey we've all been on for the last year. And, you know, refining ourselves to get back out in the world to reconnect with people. You know, that saying that quote, will hold truth for different people. And you know, and that truth can evolve and change over time. And so I was I was just wondering what your truth was, within that, but also open it out to the other women as well. You know, what is your truth in in I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired?

Demi Nandhra

It's a funny thing, because I feel like I make everything being sick and tired, like, absolutely everything being sick and tired. And tired, it's usually more than that. It's usually I'm experienced chronic fatigue or something like that. But majority my base level is sick and tired. Regardless of that is both personal and then like, social and political. It just all blends into one. And I suppose one of the reasons why I got interested in this project, I was I got really obsessed with why all my WhatsApp groups were just all my friends and we were all just sick and really tired. I had so many friends just being like, I can't access this.... I can't get a GP appointment. I don't know what's going on. And I'm ill, you know, I'm ill and no one's looking after me, no one is trying to look after me. And it was always marginalised people, it was always the people that that are my friends and my family. And it was just this cycle. And I was just started, I went through thinking, Okay, well, I, I'm really depressed. A lot of friends of mine are depressed, chronically not even just like bouts. But you know, experiencing chronic illnesses as well. And I was like, well, it's not because I'm just attracting these people. I mean, probably is, so I became really obsessed with the kind of political look at it, and the political depression, and kind of the lack of just the lack of justices, for certain people, for Black and Brown people. And when I started the project, and I don't know if I'm ever ever gonna finish it, because I don't know where I don't know what it is, I really don't. And I'm okay to say that now, if this would have happened a few years ago, oh, my God, I would have come with all my books, all these things to try and lace over something.... which, if you've looked at the bio, you can see that I'm just chatting shite. It's just a feeling that I have, like, it's a feeling of this cycle. And this, these incredible things that keep happening. And these lack of Liberation's for so many people. And when I started the project, I never classed myself as disabled, I thought that wasn't something that I could hold. And as I've gone on, I've learned a bit more about Disability Justice. I've, I've learned more about the Social Model of Disability, and how society disables you know. Suriya you just said that didn't you? Someone said it! And so, as I've gone on with the project, and I realised I don't know anything, and I'm still really sick and tired. But it's weird, it doesn't feel, and this is because I

see the people that on this panel, their work, I don't feel completely exhausted by the cycle. Does that make sense? I just, I feel a bit more held. And I see a bit more community, even if I'm too ill to directly be in person or be with those communities. I think it's just because I've embedded myself more into this community of people, of these women, of these artists that are and organisers and activists that are doing work. And I don't know, yeah.

Suriya Aisha

Yeah, I think there's something empowering in labelling yourself as sick and tired for me. And I think even before we were doing the introduction, so I've got another project called SickBabe, which I didn't say, because it's been delayed, because of my sickness or my tiredness. And so even even owning the fact that with the way our paces as artists are sick, as disabled artists, or whatever. It might, it's like, a really hard process to go through. But I found the empowerment in owning the fact that I'm sick, and I am tired. And it's a reminder to myself, as you know, like what you were saying, though, it's a reminder of the choices you can make, and how you can reclaim space. And, that you don't have to live with this internalised ableism that drives you to keep going and keep working at a pace that you can't sustain, and that you're constantly in this burnout cycle. And I think also, like you said Demi, it allows you to connect with community in a way that you weren't able to before because you can have the WhatsApp groups called 'Sick and Tired' or Sick Babe' or just 'Fed Up', a base or whatever. And you remember that when you're sitting in bed at 12pm, and you haven't started your day, and that's you're probably not going to start until 3pm. Because that's just the way your body is today, that there's someone else actually having that same experience. And it allows you to unpick these ideas of how did we even fall into these patterns and who were they made for? So I think there's some people who would see 'Oh, you're calling yourself sick' or 'you're saying that you're tired' and see is like a depleting label... but I find it really empowering to remind me of the path that I'm on and the world that we're trying to call for people like me and other people. And say, the more of us that say no to this idea that, you know, the better it can be for for the most marginalised than those who are suffering from the system of capitalism, which is oppressive, basically.

Demi Nandhra

Yeah, can I just say just quickly, Suriya said exactly what I was trying to articulate. It's this idea of before, when the project started a few years ago, it was about trying to calm myself and label something. But actually, and then when I did label it, I still didn't have an acceptance of it. And, and I've got to a point now I'm going to be 31. I own the like, Suriya did this beautiful workshop on 'Failure'. I own the word failure. Every time I tell people I'm failing.

But I don't see it in an ableist way. I really use it with such power. Same with being sick, saying we've been tired. Obviously, every day it differs. And we fall for this, you know, because we live in an ableist society, we'll fall for it. But it's different. It's a different feeling. The more we learn about disability, and disability movements. And the people that have come before, the more I realised that and the more I would need to learn. Yeah, there's so much power there. There's so much validation and acceptance for me, which I crave for as a person.

Amahra Spence

I think there's something that you've both touched on, to me, that the... The stronghold that capitalism has on our society, on our, on our bodies, on our people, and really feels like it's the roots of, you know, a lot of, like, ableism stems from the idea of how have our bodies able to be in relation to labour and all of those things? Like, I'm a proud sick babe, who's a proud mom of a sick babe. And, you know, like, I'm really, I'm in this place right now, and if asked me this question, maybe even like two weeks ago, I would have a completely different response, but I am taking I think, Toni-Dee started this, like, 'Rest as Resistance'. I have intellectualised what that means. I feel like, "yeah, yeah, I need to reclaim my time" and "I need to go and take a nap". How do I take a nap as a mother? Like, you know, I can, like rationalise and be like that, but right now my body's saying, oh, like, okay, to rest is literally like, resistance against warfare. Let me go take a nap! Like, nobody else can possibly make me feel like, like, capitalism is the driver in my life. I had the most beautiful conversation with Suriya recently. So I'm just going to just if you don't mind, Suriya, just talk about a tiny snippet, because you said something along the lines of.. "Our lives, and our experiences are so rich, beyond capitalism, we have so much about us, our culture, the way that we're in relation with each other, the way that we have music and dance and artistry, without capitalism", Why the hell am I going to go and kill myself? Me and my beautifully sick and tired body going to kill myself to live within capitalist systems? Voluntarily? As if my ancestors already didn't, you know? Listen. Toni-Dee come true my girl!

Pam Johnson

Yeah, Toni's on mute! *laughter* Gosh talk about a performance!

Toni-Dee Paul

Because if I spoke every time you wouldn't hear none of the words. You would just hear me go, "mmmm!" "Yeah". "Louder for the people in the back"

No, it's, it's so real. Like, I just want to tail off something that Amahra just said then. Our ancestors historically did not have a choice in their labour. Why am I putting myself in the position of breaking my body when I have the opportunity to say no, and not everyone does? I want to acknowledge that not everyone does. I live in a Western society. I am technically my own boss, I'm self employed. So the parameters of which, which decisions I get to make about my body are I have autonomy in a way that a lot of people that look like me do not. But you know, once we acknowledge that, like, I'm not putting myself in a position to break and fold and be in pieces when I can choose otherwise. And that's for me, the choosing rest as resistance is about honouring ancestors, as well as acknowledging my body, as well as looking into the future and saying, "What's the world I want to leave for the people that are tiny now?" You know, I have nieces and nephews who... I see them and I'm like "I want to build a better world for you... I want you to be able to exist freely" I want my autistic nephew, who is already seen as a threat at nine years old, to live freely, to be liberated from like all of this. And I feel like it is my duty to choose to build better for them for everyone really. So, it's living within those like three timelines, right, of going like: I'm honouring those people that didn't have a choice, I'm honouring myself because I can choose, and I want to build better for people that come after me. And actually they're not after me they're now, like I want to build a better world now really. But, I'm always thinking about those those three things in tandem, like how does the honouring of my ancestors legacy also build a framework for those people who, maybe, don't know yet that actually there's another way of doing things? It doesn't have to be like this. It doesn't have to be burnout at 30, and people not returning to an arts sector because there's no infrastructure to look after them. You know, it doesn't have to be that folks are sat in that group chat only able to disclose the ways in which organisations bully and manipulate and enable ableism and then you know you have to go back to the grind public facing you know all of that is it's really messy stuff. But, I feel like there is another way of doing it and being here acknowledging all of the work that like us as individual practitioners do, think a lot about Amahra's work, and what it would what it would have felt like for me at maybe 15/16/17 to know that there was a facility in my city that was curated literally for me as an artist. But, also there to nurture me as a person, to acknowledge who I am. To not try and squash me be working class, or squash me being Black, squash me being disabled, none of that is happening because I'm allowed to exist in all of those things. And also... here's some resources to make some art because you're good at it! Here's a bed to lay down on because you need the rest. And I think about the ways in which we're practitioner is actually moving, it's moving forward the idea that eventually, eventually there will be different mechanisms for us to exist and who better to deliver it than us right?!

Pam Johnson

No, absolutely. You know what, and I'm struck by the fact that I'm in a room with five, we are five Women of Colour. And I consider myself, to be you know at the age of 50 odd, I'll keep the odd and not give you the detail! But, at my age I consider myself to be empowered you know, I've done the work and I've gone through the journey, but I sit and I listen, and I mean each of you when you talk about your practice, you talk about your voice, your position, what you have to say and already you're giving me a greater sense of what empowered actually means today. And it's that difference between you know having choice, because I was born into a first generation in the UK, so I've got choice, right, but nobody really empowered me to take the choice. And that's the difference that I'm really seeing and hearing in all of you today which is it just really is so empowering in itself.

Amahra Spence

There's something there about this question of choice. The last performance projects I did, Concubine, that was like one of the central questions was: What's the difference between choice and option? Like, what are the options that are actually available for us to choose from? I think this is like you know where, Toni-Dee, what you're talking about is where where our work can be safe. But where our personhood could be safe. I know certainly in my city I don't have the options, the various options to choose from. So, the choices that I have to make is what's the space that's going to harm me the least? How can I how can I possibly show up and be safe and be held when that's the choice that I have to make? How can I possibly be my best self, or do my best work in an ecosystem that is directly complicit in my harm? We have to create something else. But I never feel or felt like I'm starting from scratch. I've never felt like that. I never felt like, "Oh, this is a brand new path that's being carved". I'm so obsessed with lineages. I'm so obsessed with the people who came before me in my lifetime. And before that have laid the blueprint for me to even be here to see the way that I see. If I can geek out about intergenerational time travel for two seconds... I would love to, because Toni talks about like the three parallels, or most of time that you hold. Harriet Tubman, like the most, you know, one of the most infamous disabled warriors of all time, was literally, you know, in her visions, seeing and realising us here today as possible. And that's what made the pursuit that she was on feasible, because she knew we and our people would be here today. So she's drawing on us. What do I draw upon now? If that is not the most incredible intergenerational time travel move? I know we're magical! Come on!

Suriya Aisha

Everytime you say that I'm Amahra, my tears, the tears just come to my eyes. Because you know, you don't ever... and the thing is, you know what that time travel thing that you shared with me last time we spoke I was like... that is what allows me to lie down back in my bed, you know? Because, Harriet Tubman did not imagine me breaking my back in no meeting where anybody's gonna disrespect me? No way! Do you know what I mean, like you said, so I honour it. But it's also just the sense of, I think, for me as well being like, third generation immigrant. And when you talked about Abuelos, Amahra, there's a desire to hold the energy that our grandparents, held for us when we were growing up, because, you know, we've lost some of those spaces now, where it was a sanctuary in so many ways that we didn't even really know like, it was like, I can go and be seen and be held and be fed. And be all these... and have the stories and all this kind of stuff. And I can come out and that's what birthed a lot of our inspiration, my nan reading me poetry and all these different things. And it wasn't it wasn't an Art Centre. It was my Art Centre, I mean that at the young age. And so I feel like that's also like the, the anti capitalist, the decolonial work. It's like, "What is even seen as value within the art sector?" Like, it's not just these engagement projects, and dah, dah, dah, dah, dah, like, reclaiming what we see as our artistry. I'm sick and tired of also being told who I am as a Black person in this art world. And I mean, I'm sick and tired of being told that I have to work in this way. Let's let's use our imagination, please. Because that's not creative. Should I mean, if we're only thinking in this way, that's not creative. Sometimes I sit in the arts, and I think this is the most un-creative space that I've been in in a long time.

Demi Nandhra

I know.

Toni-Dee Paul

Ain't that the truth!

Demi Nandhra

And he said, we're talking about like, past generations, and the warmth and the nurturing of that. I think, what's really interesting about, all, like, all of your works. So I can think back to one, I can multiple examples, but I can go from one example from each of you that you've either organised, curated, performed something that I felt those things. I felt nurtured, warmth. There's this thing and people reduce it a lot. And they'll say, Oh, it's their culture. And I'm like, Yeah, I get what you're saying... but no, like, it's human connection. Like, it's

yeah.... I mean, yeah okay. You realise actually how much works we've made without souk and without without love and kindness and compassion. Even when it is the most seemingly, yet like not compassionate space, if that makes sense. I was at a family funeral the other day and I'm Sikh, and it's first I've been to the Temple, a Gurdwara, for a really long time. I don't really go when we could go, I only go when I'm told to go. But I do like going. I just don't make it by like a daily thing cuz I don't know. I tried it once. And it just was weird, because then I was like "Can I do a project?!". Calm down! Calm yourself! Do you know what I mean like, it was too much! Anyway, and we've got this thing called Langar, and that's where you feed. So, it's you know you've probably heard like, Sikh Soup Kitchens and stuff, like that but the premise is that you if anyone comes to the Gurdwara you get fed. So you sit in the same space and you all eat. And, at the funeral, and we were having Langar and then I looked and I realised that everything was in a bag ready to go. And I was just like, so one, I was like really surprised because obviously I didn't think that was gonna happen because of COVID, I just thought I thought we were just had to go home because you know it was like only 30 people etc... But the reason I'm talking about this is because I think i've been in spaces that you've all curated and there's been food. Like there has been food or there has been something to nourish me or to something to take on the idea. And, when I think that back to my family and my culture and that space and I was like "Oh my god I just want to spend time with my family and eat this food". I was starving and we had to eat it in the car. And I can't get over how much I really wanted that because I'm not actually I'm not in those spaces a lot. And so what I'm trying to say is that there's this, yeah, there's just this coldness and that makes you feel even more fatigued and more tired and more sick when you're in other spaces that are like oppressive and the works that I've seen all of you create and collaborate with, and make, as always it always feels really intersectional. And I don't even just mean that in terms of people's peoplehood, it is in terms of like body, mind and spirit you know. Like it's not even just like... "Let's serve your intellect, let's serve your brain, let's serve your feet, let's serve your belly, let's serve like your hair..." That's what really inspires me because you can forget it quite quickly because you will be in white spaces and it will very clinical very back to a medical model very oppressive very ablest.

I'm sorry i have to say this, but I can't get over that Yard is technically the only even though it's not really open yet the only space in Brum that you could stay in an art space. Birmingham Rep has bedrooms, i know one person and they're in this talk that has been there. I've never heard people that like 'Ah! The rep! Ah, so happy to be in that bedroom and looked after!' Nah. I can't wait to be at Yard, I can't wait to just hear people's experiences. And that is something that's just been established. It baffles me and I don't want

to make it about you know how shit other things are, I want to make it about this and the great things you're all doing.

Pam Johnson 38:03

Can I pick up on something I think that you've all said really in different ways... so what I'm looking at on my screen is a beautiful picture of intersectionality. But, then you know we've talked about our work you know in varying kind of ways. Do you think that the world that we make and we present work in is actually ready for the work, for our voice for the work that we make? Or are they still trying to reduce you to the - "that's Black, that's female, that's disabled.... that is "this". That is in effect reducing who you are as people rather than taking all of you. And actually what prompts that question is Demi talking about the the holistic experience of food, for the belly, for the soul, for nurturing for communicating, for connecting. And so, in certain cultures you find your whole self and your whole self can breathe, but in some sections of the world that we operate in it's still only ready for a part of you.

Amahra Spence

Hmm, you know what my body wanted to respond to that and I don't want to be the one that's always like you know "capitalism!" However, it always feels like with this concept, like people talk about the arts as like a neo-liberal system and the buildings and the spaces the organization's are basically upholding capitalism the thing about the spirit, and the holistic, is you can't scale that you cannot scale spirit so therefore there is no container for this work in that system.

Demi Nandhra

laughs Video description! We all....

Pam Johnson

I wish the listeners could actually see the actions. If movement speaks guys you are speaking volumes.

Demi Nandhra

Amahra talks truth though.

Amahra Spence

But even that this spirit of our responses how we interact with each other, we don't have to use words to be able to detect how we feel. You can't scale that. There is no audience engagement form that could hold that, you know, we're beyond that paradigm.

Suriya Aisha

The thing is like, you've got to, for me the last year, I felt the most creative and free that I felt in a long time and a lot of that is because I haven't interacted with any major mainstream art spaces, and the one time that I do, I was felt bullied manipulated and dehumanised. So, that's the thing is, like, I've now, doing the undoing of what do I believe that audience who's the audience where do I believe that they are, and where do I think that my, like, you know, we all as artists have that validation thing "oh I want to have my work in X, you want me to do X, Y, and Y", or like oh "that person's doing that so I want to do it" and actually on picking all of those things and those internalised ideas of what classifies me as, as successful or how, when can I call myself an artist. And like, going back to our ancestors and that, you know, I feel like that's the spirit and the energy that's coming down at the moment is like my first storyteller with my grandma and my some of the best songwriters when my auntie, you know, it was really was. And I think my mum would never call herself a storyteller or performer or writer or anything like that. *laughter*

Demi Nandhra

Performance Artist! *laughter*

Suriya Aisha

But she never said it. But it was so powerful and I think, I really want to have in my stomach feeling that feeling of like, I feel as proud when I tell stories to my nephews to my labelings to whoever, as I do when I stand on the stage, doing a big poetry in some big town hall. God I mean, not to say I'm never going to engage in those things again but it reframes your mindset to go, who is my audience, and if I die tomorrow or in even in 10 years and I never performed on a stage again, I want to be a piece of that because actually, me as an artist, it's like a purpose that was given to me from my ancestors and I'm a creative person sharing my energy in that format because of who I am. It's nothing really to do with these white systems or these capitalist systems that can box me in. What I'm saying that to myself as well, I believe that. But, in this time especially and seeing how different marginalised groups and different groups are responding to the pandemic and what losing theatre means for certain people and all these other things, has really made me know how we will come to this from

different places and I need to own my story and how I came to this place, if that makes sense.

Pam Johnson

Wow, it's really powerful. And we're coming close to the end but I want to make the final word about, about your voice, and the work that you make. So it could be a piece of work that you recently made, or a piece of work that you're currently making or that you want to make. And just, just give us a quick summary each of you about a piece of work that you want to really connect to audiences that will carry a message that you want to give to the world. No pressure. So, off you go.

Demi Nandhra

I made a meme! I'm claiming that as art, okay!

Toni-Dee Paul

It is art!

Demi Nandhra

Thank you very much. Thank you very much. No, I did, Louise Orwin, who's an artist I did their workshop, and it was like week long, but it was about trying to reconnect with your practice, and because I've noticed over the last year I haven't really created anything from my imagination. I've kind of like carried on projects that, you know, like, There's nothing new, you know, I'm not giving birth to anything. I'm not dreaming, any, any bigger. And that's why I keep seeking out other people's work, cuz I'm like "Ooh they're dreaming". Oh, let me just look. Let's look at that. So I did that workshop and I did this meme. So can you see it? So, it's that woman, and she's winking and she's joking and it says, "I have so much more to my practice than my trauma, WINK!". I love that. It's because, so for ages I thought, my practice needs to be, I need to have more than, that's just my trauma, like I can't keep centering myself blah blah blah. Or you know, there's something damaging about this. Actually no, like, I make work about trauma, and I really own that now because I have such a healthy, well I don't have such, but I have a healthier relationship to trauma. And actually, is that people resonate with that work, is that they are interested about themselves. And what I said about when you, you know that it's not just self care, it's collective care. And when we start talking about individual, our lived experiences... We said this the other week, but when you know when you've watched work or been in something, and been around, and you're watching something or you're listening, or you experience something, and in your own mind your

own experience of the similar thing intermingles with that artwork, you know when that happens you know when you're watching, and it's not necessarily same exact experience but intermingles with what your memories of that of that kind of similar experience. I think that is gorgeous. I think when that work is made, I think that is truly radical because there's an access for me, I become accessible to my traumas. Someone has allowed me in warmth and safety for me to access my memories and my traumas and intermingle with their artwork and make new artwork that they don't even know about... they don't even know about! And so the reason why I love that meme now is because, for ages I was like, oh, you know, I want to make frivolous work, but I don't, I really don't. I want to make trauma, I want to make work about what has really impacted us and and how we move forward. So as I move forward, that's what I'll be doing!

Pam Johnson

Amazing.

Amahra Spence

I think I'm going into R&D soon for a new project called The Water Series, which it's been inspired by Alexis Pauline Gumbs who is another person I adore. Who reminded us, I think it was in The End of the World Podcast actually, reminded us that sound carries in water for much longer than it does in air. And therefore, like the sounds of our ancestors who literally leaped from boats who leaped from ships into the water. Their cries. Their screams their prayers, still reverberating in the, in the ecosystem today, the vibrations are still with us and still surrounding us. And through that sentiment I'm really exploring sound, water and image. So I'm, I'm looking forward to getting into that.

Pam Johnson

That's amazing. Toni, Suriya?

Toni-Dee Paul

Okay. So, I spoke briefly about my project Doze a little bit earlier. I haven't, I officially haven't worked on that project for 10 months now. And that's like quite a purposeful distancing from the work, because I think work has this weird way of becoming like a fine dust on everything. And what I really didn't want was this work that's about liberation of freedom to become this laborious thing that I do. It's like the opposite of the point of the work. And so taking some space away from it, but I'll probably be back working on it in, in a couple of months time. But I think the thing I'd want to, to sort of leave with around that work is that,

in my opinion, like, the most powerful people among us, and are the people that are building the worlds that we're in. And you can't divest yourself of the responsibility of building your world. And for me Doze is about, it's about world building, it's about offering something else. An alternative trying something new, because the things that we've done before, haven't worked, they don't work. They actively, stop people from being able to live their best lives. And so I am choosing to build something better with Doze. And I hope that like, I hope it's a work that never really ends, I think, I hope in my head. It's a work that like last for like 25 years. There's an incredible artist called Ellie Harrison, who is Leeds based actually. She is has been creating a piece of work called grief series for a really long time. I don't want to say a number because I'll probably get it wrong, but for a while. And I really admire her commitment to being like, this is a piece of work that's gonna take time. This is a piece of work that is going to look different. It's going to have different iterations, it's going to exist as almost a body of work to explore the things rather than just this thing that you can put on a stage on this thing that you can put in the street. And it's no but that work is like truly meaningful in the fullest sense. And that's what I want for why me, too, for something that I make to be worth building and truly thankful.

Pam Johnson

That's beautiful. Suriya.

Suriya Aisha

I'm writing a piece at the moment called Dead Certain, which is a Drama-dy, crime comedy silliness. I don't know what it is but what I know is that I've had a lot of fun writing it, because it's funny.

Demi Nandhra

Laughter It's the way you said it... Drama Comedy!

Suriya Aisha

Drama-dy! It's a crime, mixed with comedy and drama, whatever that genre is, is what I've created. And I really loved writing it and I've loved working with the actors on it because it is, it's got jokes, so when I'm reviewing the footage that we've created and written together. I'm crying with laughter and you know what I haven't had a time where for a while that I've really enjoyed writing and actually then enjoyed seeing it performed or whatever it might be for whatever reason, and I feel like, why I really am leaning towards like writing comedy a bit more is because, because I'm really also challenging the idea that we write in our voice as

Black people. And we don't kind of "tone police it", code switch it in any way, that means that anybody else understand it. So whoever gets the jokes, gets the joke in it and if you don't get the reference you don't get the reference. And so, I'm excited about encapsulating our moments of joy in our everyday because we laugh a lot. You know I mean, I mean I laugh a lot with my friends even me and Toni-Dee before this meeting, just sending memes back and forth, *laughter* just crying in my bed that's what I do the majority of the day. So it's that thing of much in my actual life of what I do, which is my time I spend just bussing joke and being silly. So it's I want to create that in my work, so I'm hoping to write some more comedy and I'm going to do another writers room stuff which is, which will come out soon, which is also a comedy project. And, I never thought that I would do that but I'm really enjoying doing that so that's that's my resistance at the moment is just having fun in the writing that I'm doing so yeah.

Pam Johnson

Well, that's amazing. You know, when I introduced myself earlier on I talked about being in the arts industry for 30 odd years, and I've seen all manner of theatre performance, R&D work being made, and you don't really tire of it, but just listening to your voice and your experience what you express through your work but also the work that you're making... you know, I'm going to come out and find you because I you know, it feels that all of you speak to me. And you know I relate to your experience and it feels that I think, you know, enjoying your work will just enrich my experience of 'the arts', I say it inverted commas. But yeah, I am going to come and find you, that sounds threatening. I'm going to... I'm gonna come find you. And that's just really essential, but you know, I just got to finish off by saying, Toni, Suriya, Amahra, thank you so much. It's been such a joy to have you in the space. And of course, I've got to say thank you to Demi, because you convened and created this space with an extraordinary body of artists including yourself. It has been an absolute joy. Thank you.

Elle Money

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