Interviewee Name: Alison Bennett
Interviewer Name: Erin Scudder
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Length of Interview: 54:45 minutes

Transcript

Erin: Yeah. Can I please invite you to introduce -

Alison: Sure.

Erin: - yourself however you would like to.

Alison: Okay, so my name's Alison. I'm an artist, academic. I originally trained in photography in an art school. But my father was a computer scientist, so I, when I got my first digital camera - in 2001, it was? - it was suddenly like, okay, this is what I'm here for. So I work, I work in what's called expanded photography. So photography in the expanded field, beyond the sort of isolated 2D frame. Photography's evolving and spreading in curious and exciting ways, I feel. But a lot of my work sits very comfortably in the sort of new media digital art space. So, for example, I've had my work included in the ISEA [International Symposium on Electronic Art] exhibition, which is a, a big international art and technology symposium happening in Paris in the next month as well.

Erin: Amazing.

Alison: So yeah, I came - let's see. I've worked - I've aligned myself a lot with the Queer Creative Practice movement. I've done lots of work for the Midsumma Festival, for example. And I'm - and I'll talk about, a little bit about that, if you like, in terms of the work I've done as a mentor, particularly in their disability mentorship program.

Erin: That would be fabulous.

Alison: Yeah, yeah. I - and I come from very, very much an outsider culture in that I grew up in regional Australian alternative communities, which is a whole 'nother sort of cultural context and, and the experience of living on the margins is a place that I have found a lot of productivity in terms of my intellectual and creative work. So we can talk about that as well. WASP, Anglo-Saxon, Scottish, Cornish cultural background. A little bit of Portuguese and, and Sardinian, I believe. So, but, but yeah. But as my kids say, you're so white.

Erin: [Laughing]

Alison: It's like - yeah, yeah. So. But in terms of the going through the list here.

Erin: Yeah.

Alison: So I think all of those things and I was diagnosed with autism as an adult in my 30s, coinciding with my kids being diagnosed as being neurodiverse as well. So, and one of the things I'm hoping to unpack with you is about the kind of cultural changes that have happened around neurodiversity in the last couple of decades - it's incredibly, incredibly significant.

Erin: Yeah, yep.

Alison: And terribly interesting.

Erin: Yeah. Well I guess, if we look at the next question, broad question: what experiences have helped you become the creative practitioner you are today?

Alison: Oh gosh.

Erin: If you wanted to talk - yeah, it's so broad.

Alison: It's very broad. I mean, there's lots of things I could talk about. My grandmother teaching me how to knit.

Erin: Oh yeah.

Alison: And how to sew, which is essentially teaching me how to think in 3D. Yeah.

Erin: Yeah, yeah. I was thinking like, yeah, this set of questions - [inaudible]

Alison: I'm sorry. You're going to have to repeat that, start again.

Erin: Oh, sorry.

Alison: I'm only getting bits of that.

Erin: So the next three bullet points, under past practice, they all deal with how you got to where you are now, what you're doing. So given that you've just given, given me a few insights on things like -

Alison: Yeah.

Erin: Like, whatever you'd like to focus on -

Alison: Sure.

Erin: - just speak to that.

Alison: Okay.

Erin: Yeah.

Alison: So I mean, one point I could make is that, two people who I've, I have already mentioned is my grandmother and my father. My father did his PhD in computer science in the 60s and 70s in Australia at a time when it wasn't a separate field. He did it, he obviously did it in mathematics. But he dedicated his PhD to his mother as being the person who taught him how to code. And she also taught me how to think in 3D. So it - the way that we can take a piece of fabric and cut it and reshape it into a 3D object - she taught me that sitting on her carpet in summer holidays. So - and, and in retrospect, now that I understand neurodiversity and autism, I can recognise that both my father

and my, and my grandmother were on the spectrum, and that there were sort of ways in which they, they took the strength of those and were able to pass them on to me in that way.

Erin: Yeah.

Alison: Oh, gosh. And I'm - I'm trying to filter this through what might be useful, what I think might be useful for your project in terms of things that have ... helped me to identify the intersection of disability discourse and my creative practice.

Erin: Yeah.

Alison: The - I think a really important moment for me was when I was - started working with Daniel - and I'm going to struggle with his surname - he's now the director of the Footscray Community Arts Centre.

Erin: Oh yep, yep.

Alison: Yep. So Daniel was a program manager in - at the Midsumma Festival, and I was running a project called QueerTech - which was, ah, queer artists who were using technology in particular ways. And he - when I first started working with him, I explained to him that I was autistic and he went, 'okay.' And I was like, 'what? Th-, that's it?' And he went 'well yeah? You tell me you're autistic, I believe you.' And up until that point, I, I would - all these people were going 'no, no.' It was like this - yeah. Which is, which is a real me- - it's a really - it's a, it's a really predictable response.

Erin: Yeah.

Alison: When you disclose that you're on the autism spectrum.

Erin: Yeah.

Alison: People don't believe you, and question you, and doubt you. Whereas he - he, his, his politics were, if someone discloses, that you believe them.

Erin: Yeah.

Alison: ... and ask them about what they need, what they need. And that was the first time I'd experienced that. So it was like, oh, okay, good. That was a real learning thing for me. Yeah, so that was significant. Whoa, look, it, it's - you're asking me to summarise -

Erin: Well - [inaudible]

Alison: 50, 50 years. It's, it's a bit too much to do that.

Erin: I know, it's so long.

Alison: Yeah. Uh huh.

Erin: I mean, instead of summarising - this is really great what you're talking about. Like, instead of summarising. Don't feel the need to summarise. [Inaudible]

Alison: Yeah. So the last point.

Erin: Those moments, or these people that have stood out -

Alison: Yeah.

Erin: - it's great to hear about.

Alison: Yeah. So obstacles are - and - the obstacles are the ways in which there's kind of essentialised ableism embedded in a lot of systems and processes and culture essentially. So, for example - I can give a university classroom as an example. I've, I've supervised a number of autistic PhD students and Master's students and one of the things that's worked really well is having - in fact, one of the great things coming out of the pandemic - was the rise in concurrent delivery, where people can do online and -

Erin: Yeah.

Alison: - by choice, and the autistic students actually do better with online. And we had a symposium the other day where my colleagues were kind of going, oh, let's get rid of this, of this online nonsense and just do face-to-face. And the autistic students in the room were like, that's really ablelist. We're really uncomfortable with you saying that. Where was I? So that's a kind of that's a really concrete example of -

Erin: Yeah.

Alison: - a, a barrier. In my own experience, it's more - it's, it's more the fact that I come across as normal. And when you get to know me, people start to notice I'm a bit, a little bit different and sort of get a bit nervous and back away. And so - that's been a barrier to negate that I - that took me - I mean I didn't understand until I got diagnosed. And then once I got diagnosed, it was like being given an instruction manual -

Erin: Yeah.

Alison: - for understanding how, how the way that I experience the world is different to other people. And it enabled me to negotiate that a bit more and - I don't necessarily have to disclose to people, I just need to say to them, this is how my brain works -

Erin: Yep.

Alison: - so this is what you're getting. And as I've become - as I've had more runs on the board and established what I can do, and now that I've got a PhD, I'm a certified smart person. And so my, my eccentricities are kind of like, 'oh you know.' Are sort of understood in that way rather than being a bit strange. Yeah. But there are things like - I struggle with loud environments. So the feedback I gave to Midsumma Festival one year was - they do this like, launch party and I can't go because it's too loud.

Erin: Yeah.

Alison: Yeah. So they've started including things like a quiet space in the festival, like there's a tent where you have cups of tea and quiet chats rather than loud music, yeah.

Erin: Yep.

Alison: And they started doing, concurrent - like, that they'd livestream the launches so you could attend online. That made a big difference.

Erin: Yeah.

Alison: But the social aspect of my particular - I have limited capacity for face-to-face social interaction.

Erin: Yeah,

Alison: And a big part of having a career as an artist involves lots of, lots of networking.

Erin: Yeah.

Alison: So that's - I'm actually quite good at it, but I - I don't enjoy it.

Erin: Yeah, yeah. And maybe that's another form of barrier is - not, not so much the idea that being a creative practitioner involves a lot of networking, but that perhaps there's not enough different ways to do it. You know? It always -

Alison: Well, yeah.

Erin: - seems to involve face-to-face.

Alison: I've found different ways to do it.

Erin: Yeah.

Alison: ... is what I've had to do.

Erin: Yeah, yeah.

Alison: So a lot of people try and tell me how I should run my career and was like, yeah, no, that doesn't work, I can't do that.

Erin: Yeah.

Alison: So, I've had to find other ways to make it work.

Erin: Yeah.

Alison: And a lot of that is through - actually, I'll just share with you really quickly. I think one of the things that's worked for me is, is when a project involves a media release and I've developed a really good media list, so don't actually do a lot of face-to-face networking, I - but I am able to give enough that people then learn about what I'm doing and come to me -

Erin: Yep.

Alison: - with offers and invitations. If that makes sense.

Erin: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Alison: So -

Erin: You also talked about how -

Alison: Yep.

Erin: - how important the intersection or coexistence of queer theory and disability has been. So would you like to talk a bit about, like how that's been a - how that's evolved for you over the course of your career as an influence?

Alison: How that's been a - oh influence. Yep, sure.

Erin: Yeah.

Alison: I was going to dive into that during the identity politics.

Erin: Oh, we can - we can, if you'd rather.

Alison: That's all right. I'm just, I was just working through the list, but we can jump to that now. Yeah that's fine. Okay. So, and part of the person that started to articulate this for me was Steve Silberman. He wrote a book called Neurotribes. Have you come across it?

Erin: No, I'm writing it down.

Alison: Okay. It's called Neurotribes, and there's lots of interviews and shorter articles out there which will help as well. And there's one in particular where he talked about the intersection of autism politics and - autistic politics and activism - and queer politics and activism. And his book is really much - is about the cultural framing of autism and how that's changed from being a bit of a really shameful thing that was caused by refrigerator mothers and the treatment of it was - the response to it was to remove the child from the family because it was thought to be caused by the mother's being un-, being unemotional and not emotionally connecting with the kids that was causing the children to display these features. And one historical curiosity is that the, the guy who - I haven't got his name in my fingertips - but the guy who came up with this particular formulation - I can follow up with some articles for you -

Erin: Yeah, sure.

Alison: But the guy who came up with this particular formulation is also the same person who came up with the gay conversion therapy.

Erin: Oh, okay.

Alison: It's a, it's, there's actually an intersection historically between those two ideas.

Erin: Yeah, wow.

Alison: But what's happened in more recent years is that autism. self-advocacy has looked to queer politics and their models of how we can reframe and understand what it

is. So, in the same way that homosexuality has been - used to be classed as a mental disorder -

Erin: yeah.

Alison: - in the DSM and through activism, it has been reframed as an identity. There is similar kind of ideas about rethinking and repositioning autism as - under a neurodiversity lens, rather than a disability lens. Which is complicated because it is a disability. Yeah, and like all disabilities, you can argue that, that it's socially produced disability. So if you use the social model of disability, as opposed to the medical model of disability, all disability is socially produced.

Erin: Yeah.

Alison: That's not, that's not a new idea to you, I assume?

Erin: No.

Alison: Good, okay. So, you know, and the idea of autistic pride is similar to queer pride in that - and pride is the, the flip side of shame.

Erin: Yeah.

Alison: Yep. So when people ask, why do you need a pride march? Because it's a way of moving forward out of shame. And it's like, you don't need a pride march if you've not experienced shame. And, so many of the ways that - up until quite recently, autism was an extremely shameful condition. Yeah. And you still get a lot of - as I've said to you before - there's still a lot of weird things that people say when you disclose that you're autistic. Yeah. Things like, 'oh, yeah, we're all a little bit autistic, aren't we?' And, 'oh, no, you're you're not autistic, I don't believe you.' Through to people being very sort of, extremely patronising and even sort of treating you like a child or simply sort of dismissing your concerns because you're not a, not a whole person, essentially. And that was the historical framing of autism. If you go back and read some of the original sort of framing of it, is that - okay, there's a, the idea that an autistic person is an incomplete person that needs to be fixed in some way. But they're not, they're not a real

person, they need to be made into a person. It's really quite barbaric when you start to read through the literature.

Erin: Yeah.

Alison: But in terms of - so to come back to your question, which was about the intersection of queerness and, and disability or queerness and and autism. I think that autism is, is extremely queer in many ways. And I'm not the only person, I'll bring you - she talks [inaudible] - there's a fabulous book published by M. Remi [Yergeau].

Erin: Oh yeah.

Alison: Let's see. Where's it gone? It's called Authoring Autism.

Erin: Oh, yeah. I'm writing that down, too.

Alison: Yeah. Here we go. Okay.

Erin: Sounds great.

Alison: So it's this one.

Erin: Thank you.

Alison: That's all right.

Erin: [Inaudible].

Alison: Yeah. So she's arguing that autism is a form of queerness, essentially.

Erin: Yeah.

Alison: And it's kind of flipping the argument that autistic people are not persons on its head in terms of siding with the object, as it were. Like, you know, let's go with that in a way.

Erin: Yeah.

Alison: I don't know if you saw - I wrote an article in Artlink a little while ago that covered some of these ideas.

Erin: I'll look it up.

Alison: Yep. So it's in this issue here. It's, it's Artlink and the issue - it's issue 42, 2 - it's a Spring, Spring 2022. And I did an article with - it's called 'Autistic Embodiment and the Extended Mind.'

Erin: Right.

Alison: Yep. So it looks like, looks like that.

Erin: Thank you.

Alison: So this. Yeah. So this will include lots of the references I'm giving you.

Erin: Yeah.

Alison: But also some of the, some of these ideas are talked about in that. And it's written in conjunction with my friend and collaborator, a guy called Dean Walsh -

Erin: Okay.

Alison: - who's a choreographer and dancer and who is also on the autism spectrum.

Erin: Yeah.

Alison: So and you'll find lots of other stuff in this issue, too. It's a really beautiful piece of work by Artlink.

Erin: Thank you for sharing that.

Alison: That's okay, my pleasure. So -

Erin: [inaudible]

Alison: I, I make no apologies for being a bit of a nerd. I - academia is a good place for me. I, I like the structure and complexity of academic thinking. For me, it works.

Erin: Yeah, I can relate to that.

Alison: Yes, yes, yes. So where were we?

Erin: So I guess - yeah. As you say, I sort of jumped ahead of it. But next on the list that I gave you is, is moving into your present practice. And I guess maybe the article you just referred to is a good jumping off point, so -

Alison: I'm sorry.

Erin: Oh sorry! [Inaudible].

Alison: Sorry, darling. Erin, I only got half of that.

Erin: The next set of questions touch on your present practice. So we could move through them. The first is, what are you currently working on or passionate about in your practice?

Alison: Sorry, I didn't get that.

Erin: What are you currently working on?

Alison: Oh, what am I currently working on? Awesome. Okay.

Erin: Yeah.

Alison: So my current project is a project called Vegetal Digital.

Erin: Okay.

Alison: You'll find some documentation on my website, and it's a project that came out of the pandemic, where I spent a lot of time alone, even th- - and, for some - I was doing a lot of teaching online, but I was basically not in the room with anyone for months at a time. And I would go out for my hour a day of walking and - within a five kilometre bubble - and found myself engaging with plants in new ways. And it kind of - yeah, I - but yeah, just everything became almost like vibrant matter, which is the reference to I think Jane 's or Jill 's book on Vibrant Matter. The way that, that matter is alive. But was also interested in the work being done by - on vegetal thinking, which is about consp- - speculative - it's theoretical speculation on the way that - of plant sentience and the way that plants perceive and are conscious. And within phenomenology, there's an idea that vision and perception is a shared process. Traditionally, within, sort of, the way in which - Eurocentric mainstream-accepted thinking is that the whole sort of the gaze, the power of the gaze hierarchy concept put forward by Laura Mulvey - which was really important in the 20th century because images were used, for example, images of women, for example, were used in terms of perpetuating power relations. Phenomenology gives us another way to think through this in terms of vision being a shared process that: just as I look at this cup, just as I orientate the cup, the cup orientates to me.

Alison: And so I was starting to think about the plants in terms of not just me looking at the plants, but the plants perceiving me as well.

Erin: Yeah.

Alison: So I - and it really builds into this, this thread of thinking within not only queer creative thinking, but also within, I think, that I see a lot from my autistic community, is this horror at the hierarchy of me as a subject and objects as something that I can - that, that I have dominion over.

Erin: Yeah.

Alison: So it's about sort of questioning this hierarchy / hierarchical, master / slave sort of thinking, yeah.

Erin: Yeah.

Alison: So this particular project, I've - you'll see some videos on my website where, just as - it's an interactive system, I've made these 3 - I've made these 3-, 3D models of Australian flowers, and they're on a big screen data projection. And as you - there's a, there's a gesture sensor - and as you approach the work, it senses your presence and the plants turn towards you. And there's a set of movements that you have with your hands that allow you to engage with the plant. And it's not immediately - like it's not, it's not like 'you do this and that.' You've actually got to attune to the system to understand it before it will talk to you.

Erin: Yeah, yeah.

Alison: So there's a sense in which, in order to engage with the work, you actually have to attune, not only to the, to the plant, but also to the digital system - the way it's been designed -

Erin: Right.

Alison: - because it is - there's a sense of inviting the audience to connect sort of energetically with this idea of the plants or the digital system as being a thing that has agency that they have to connect with rather than having dominion over.

Erin: Yeah.

Alison: Uh huh? So you'll see a video on my website that demonstrates the in, the interactive capacity, and I describe it as being like a, a tai chi ball that you kind of have to feel it through your hands. And as you sort of attune to it, the work starts to come alive as you attune, attune with its parameters. So the experience I'm trying to get people to consider is their relationship with the plants and objects and other agencies around them, that's the sort of [inaudible] idea. For me, disability politics and queer politics are very much about - it's not simply about, the, the rights of me as a human. It's about inviting people to rethink their frameworks about this sort of - about their relationships with their environment, essentially.

Erin: Yeah, yeah.

Alison: And for me, that's a deeply political act in terms of how, how do we think through and move forward through this particular cultural crisis and existential crisis that we're facing with climate change, for example?

Erin: Yeah, yep.

Alison: Yeah. And so much of that is the result of extractive thinking and practices and I'm wanting to give people just a moment of experience that might shift their thinking a little bit differently, or propose other ways of thinking. The paradox is that digital media is part of the whole sort of problem, so I haven't quite resolved that one yet.

Erin: Yeah.

Alison: Better just go, go grow potatoes. We'll see.

Erin: If you just give me a second, I'm going to go grab some headphones and see if that -

Alison: Yep -

Erin: Helps the situation. Just one moment.

Alison: Mm-hmm.

Erin: Is that any better?

Alison: That's amazing!

Erin: Oh, okay. Wonderful.

Alison: It's incredible! Well done, darling.

Erin: I should have started out this way! Okay.

Alison: Yeah. All good.

Erin: Good.

Alison: All right, so that was a bit of a, bit of a rant.

Erin: No that was fascinating! Honestly,I wish we weren't limited to an hour because I could listen to you talk about that all day.

Alison: That's what I get paid for. My - there's an autistic trait called info dumping. One of, one of the love languages of, of autism is sharing things that you're passionate about. And my kids sort of say, do you info dump? And I'm like, honey, that's what I get paid for. It's like, yeah.

Erin: It sounds like a great thing to get paid for! It's just great.

Alison: So where are we? What do you want to talk about?

Erin: I guess that answers - that you've spoken to kind of the first couple of bullet points under present practice. So what are you currently working on and passionate about and what motivates you? The third bullet point is about where your work is showcased or visible at the moment. Is it in the spaces where you'd like it to be? Is the level of awareness around it what you'd like it to be, or, if not, how would you like to see it better showcased or received by the public?

Alison: Gosh, that's a cool question. It's an incredibly complex question. I mean, as an artist, you are, you kind of need to be used to rejection.

Erin: Yeah.

Alison: Like, it's just part of the - but in a way, the more you put out, the more rejection you deal with as well as the more opportunities that happen. So, I'm okay with that. I, I will - okay, I'm not sure if I should say this. I'm a bit - I have a - I would love to have my

work in the Melbourne Now show. And work in - such as the NGV or the National Gallery. Haven't cracked it yet. And - but I think I could eventually. But it often takes me longer to reach things than I see my counterparts do. Autistic people are often late bloomers, and that's certainly been my experience. It took me a while to find my feet. I'm in my mid 50s now, and it wasn't really till about ten years ago that I started to feel like I, I had started to understand the value of what I had to contribute. So I was in my - that puts me into my 40s before I started to find, find my feet, I think. I - I mean, I've had my work shown in the Louvre in Paris. Lots of important museums around the world have shown my work. I had my first commercial gallery show last year. I would love to have a, a good commercial gallery representing me, I haven't quite figured that one out. And I often approach these things as, as puzzles. It's like, 'oh, if I do this, how do I, how do I get that to work?' But it's also a process of working out whether that cultural context works for me. The pathway for an artist is - to be "established" is - often you, you become an established artist once you have commercial representation, but that's not necessarily the right fit for me. And there's lots of things about that that I'm not particularly comfortable about, in that it sort of packages the work as being a scarce luxury product, and that's not necessarily what I'm interested in. Things like the, the sort of digital art space has things like ISEA and lots of other sort of, more sort of experimental spaces that I find exciting and that I feel I'm a part of. One thing I haven't said, which I think is important, is that the internet - I have a career because of the internet, and most of my networking and most of the impact I've had has been because I've had access to the internet. Before that, I felt very isolated and couldn't find my community, and I - it's enabled me to have an impact on the world that I wasn't achieving, within the limitations of the Melbourne sort of gallery system, as it were. It was just not - like, people weren't interested in what I was doing until I got successful overseas, and then people started to take, take an interest in what I was doing now. So going back to your question, the third point was where would I like to be present. Yeah, look, I - I talk about - if we talk about this within the context of the research, which is as a disability context, I talk about neurodiversity as part of my practice, as a matter of course. I don't make it - I don't have any sort of shame or hesitation about articulating it. And I talk about it in the same way that I talk about queerness, in that it's just like, this is me, and I expect you to respect it. And be interested in what I have to say. So that, that's my particular sort of political position. I understand that not everybody's comfortable with that, but I choose to be up front about it, and it's been a really powerful thing within my school of art where I work. And we know that a third of our students are

on modified learning plans, which means that at least a third of our students have some kind of disability support needs, and those are just the ones that choose to register as well. So, I make a point of being the person in front of the class going, 'Hi, I'm, I'm a queer, non-binary, autistic person.' Yeah? And being completely shameless. Like, there's no shame for me in terms of being open about that. So that's been a - that's a really, that's a political act on my part. I - in terms of my practice - can you give a bit more guidance in terms of what you're curious about?

Erin: [Inaudible].

Alison: Hello?

Erin: Sorry. Can you hear me?

Alison: Just. Hang on, I'll just turn you up. You went, you went very faint all of a sudden. So I was talking to that, that point about where you're showcased, and I'm conscious there's a lot to get through in a short period of time. So I - if - I can, I can keep drilling in on everything. Each of these points could talk about an hour for. Yeah. That's enough?

Erin: I think you answered it really well -

Alison: Okay.

Erin: - with what you said.

Alison: All right. Okay. I - I can talk about each of these points for an hour, on each one if you want.

Erin: That's the, that's the problem with these questions is that -

Alison: Yeah.

Erin: - they're so - and they're sort of general and broad and there's so -

Alison: Yeah, okay.

Erin: So I mean, we can -

Alison: And I think, and I think - I'm sort of - I feel like I'm sort of delving into answering some of these.

Erin: Like you've just jumped into politics a bit, which sort of goes in - but that's great. I mean, it's really about what you want to say, using these questions as a guide -

Alison: Yep.

Erin: So I think anything - I guess I would say at this stage that any question that particularly jumped out to you, that you want to talk about the most, we can jump to that.

Alison: Look, I, I'm, I was very interested in the question about the politics one.

Erin: Yep.

Alison: And as you can hear from what I'm saying, I, I think it, for me, it is profoundly political that the kind of, the ontological frameworks through which we understand the world. I, I quoted - do you remember, in the, in the 80s, the TV show Monkey? Did you ever watch the TV show Monkey?

Erin: No, [inaudible] that's why I haven't seen it, yeah.

Alison: Yep. It's actually a Japanese -

Erin: Oh, okay.

Alison: - TV show that - it's got a bit of a cult following, but the story of Monkey is Hanuman. So Hanuman is the Monkey God and he, he - it's a whole, the whole story. But the, the opening, the opening with the credits is a quote from the monk that he's traveling with who says, 'with our thoughts, we make the world.' And I think I'm still working with that idea that the kind of conceptual frameworks through which, that the

lens that we use to understand experience has a profound experience on - impact on - not only how we experience the world, but how we act on the world.

Erin: Yeah.

Alison: And so the project I was describing earlier was very much about, the, the lens through which we understand our relationship with our environment and attempting to give people a shift in experience. And someone once described my work as being - generating these moments of encounter that give people this sort of shift in how they act themselves. I think that art is - well I think that the personal is political. It's not - you can't separate them. To say something is not political is a political position.

Erin: Yeah, that's a good point!

Alison: There's also this question around art. And - I - and that's a whole 'nother can of, can of worms. We sometimes talk about our work in terms of creative practice and yeah, the sort of, the sort of creative problem solving, in that we're creating propositions of - about different paradigms. Essentially. So it's a philosophical practice. It's a - like a form of an action, essentially. A kind of experiential philosophy, I think is a better way to understand what we're doing. I'm often, one of my dear friends was justifying something in terms of, oh, I'm an artist, I can do that. And I'm like, 'yeah, no, no, no, that's not good enough.'.

Erin: Yeah!

Alison: And, and you don't have to just - I mean, just, to just kind of paper over your work by calling it art - is, I think, a bit of a, it's not enough. It's not enough. So and, and working in, kind of at the intersection of - and digital media - photography is ubiquitous. Computing is ubiquitous. These are mediums and practices that are completely embedded throughout our culture. And - whereas art is often quite a discrete realm. And so my, I sort of sit in this space - it is like, has a, has a deep cultural impact in terms of photography and digital media - so I kind of move between that and the art world a bit. So, it's - and the, and - it says here, 'artistic success might be measured in terms of the capacity to change how people act and treat each other.' Yes. 'How do I think we should define artistic and creative success?' And I think that certainly is - I'm, I'm, I wish I was

more motivated by money. Just like - I'm just - not really interested for some reason, but I do think that artists should be able to earn a living and be - have -

Erin: Yeah.

Alison: - and be compensated and to be able to earn a living with what they do. So, it's a sort of a, a cur- - it's, it's a paradox there. But I think there's also part of - number one, I want to make good work and I want to have time to make good work that enables me to grow in terms of my intellectual curiosity about the world. The fact that that has impact and people are interested in it was a surprise to me, but it's also really changed the way I feel inside, about myself. It was a really huge growing process that had a piece of work go viral - and I was watching the numbers like - oh, there was like - thousands of hits a minute. I'm kind of going, what? What, what's happened? I don't understand. But it was also really interesting in terms of me feeling, like, encouraged that I had something to say that would connect with people.

Erin: Yeah.

Alison: And it - it all kind of became - part of the project is, you know, if I do, if I drop this image in this, in this particular location, how will it impact and travel? And that became part of the practice of looking at how these things that are really reflective of my autistic make-up is that very much interested in those complex patterns and relations. I'm just really taken by the beauty of that sort of complex that you can create in the world. And I, and I do think that's part of my autistic make-up that enables me to, to do that. But I do burn out regularly.

Erin: Yeah, yeah.

Alison: Yeah? Uh huh. Like, I have, I spent all day Saturday in bed sleeping with a doona over my head, just because it's like: 'no, I'm, I'm not working. I can't, I can't function anymore.' And those that work with me, part of the reason I like to work with other autistic creatives is that there's a sort of a respect and understanding about that. For example, working with Dean Walsh, who's the guy I collaborated with in this article -

Erin: Yeah.

Alison: - you know, we had a, a really important meeting set up, and I just was burnt out, and I just said, sorry, I'm, I'm burnt out. And they were like, 'yep, no worries. Anything you need, let us know.' And it was, in the past, I would have pushed through because it would have been seen as flaky or unprofessional to cancel. And I learned a lot from that experience in that it was okay to say I wasn't okay, and that the people I worked with would respect that. So that was quite a revelation for me.

Erin: Yeah.

Alison: And I've started to choose not to work with people who don't - who're, who are - inadvertently ableist in terms of not respecting my - that sometimes I'm not going to be capable of meeting a commitment, or I might need some kind of flexibility.

Erin: Yep.

Alison: Yep. So it's been an amazing learning process working with other autistic artists here.

Erin: I hope there will be fewer and fewer of the people with the embedded ableism.

Alison: Yes.

Erin: To have to work with, ideally, it would be great to, you know, have everyone understanding this stuff.

Alison: And, and there are lots of, of interesting things happening in the autistic artists space. Before we, before we run out of time, I will mention, in addition to these two books, there's a project called Recentering Australian Art. Dot org. And the team involved with that is my dear colleague Grace McQuilten.

Erin: Okay.

Alison: Along with Anthony White. They've - they're doing some really interesting research in this that intersects with this, these questions as well.

Erin: The only thing we haven't really touched on, which we don't have to, but just putting it out there in case there's anything you want to say is the - your take on the wider Disability Arts scene or Autistic Arts scene, and what the changes or progression has been over the last fifty years. All of these questions are massive.

Alison: Yeah, yeah!

Erin: I apologise.

Alison: That's all right. That's okay. If I can talk in terms of, as I - I alluded to - the changes in autism self-advocacy movement in the last couple of decades -

Erin: Yep.

Erin: - has been massive. I think it's one of the, sort of the major civil rights shifts of our time. And I think that that's starting to show up in the, in the amongst artists identifying as autistic.

Erin: Yep.

Alison: Which kind of parallels also queer creative practice as well, perhaps. I am beginning to share and talk about a lot more about the theory as - so for example, in this book, in this article here, I talked about the concept of bodymind and the way that the body shapes consciousness and the idea of the mind and the body being separate as being a - not a very useful concept.

Erin: Yep.

Alison: And I think that that's sort of - these sort of theoretical frameworks within disability discourse are incredibly useful for artists who are negotiating these questions.

Erin: Yeah.

Alison: It's an area that we're growing within the School of Art here, and where we've got more and more PhD students who are working on these questions.

Erin: Yep.

Alison: So it's a growing area for us as a community within our school. And I'd also point to the programs that were run by Midsumma that were mentoring artists with disabilities. That I think is a really important project. And I've seen that continue out at the - Footscray Art Centre has some great programs. Beyond that, it's probably - it's kind of like a, a bit of an accidental journey for me in some ways. I didn't start my career thinking 'this is what I'm going to position myself as.' It's kind of like this is - part has happened in my own life. And autistic people tend to find each other. So a lot of the people I end up collaborating with, either know or discover that they're autistic or neurodiverse in some way.

Erin: Yep.

Alison: So it kind of happens organically. So, I kind of, in some ways I feel embarrassed to comment on sort of the big picture, but - because I don't feel like it's something that I set out to be an expert on - but it's certainly been my lived experience. I can speak to that. Yeah.

Erin: Yes, yeah. So I think that's a great answer. And there's a lot of people I've interviewed who - I'd say, like even the majority of people who have that kind of almost, not 'before and after,' but like maybe started out in creative practice before being diagnosed -

Alison: Yep.

Erin: - or before an accident or -

Alison: Yeah.

Erin: - whatever the case may be, and then - yeah, and also, yeah, there's a couple of people I've interviewed who are kind of, I guess you could say leaders in the Disability

Art space, with a capital D and capital A, and they've got a real perspective on the whole of it from that sort of branded almost perspective. But certainly, you know, it's -

Alison: Yeah, look my, the thing that drives, the thing that drives me is my creative practice. And it's through the lens of queerness and dis-, and autism because that's who I am.

Erin: Yep.

Alison: Yeah.

Erin: Yep. I've taken up all of your time. Plus an extra two minutes.

Alison: Okay. And I probably do need to go to my next meeting, we'll be starting.

Erin: Yeah, yeah. I did want to invite you to just add anything else you might want to say. But having said that, I know we're out of time.

Alison: I, I am out of time. But I - no, it's lovely to sort of chat with you and I can - I'll try and follow up with some links for you.

Erin: Great. Thank you.

Alison: Yep. Easy.

Erin: I've really, really enjoyed the chat and I think we covered -

Alison: That's okay.

Erin: - so much.

Alison: All the best.

Erin: Yeah. Thank you very much.