

Interviewee: Kath Duncan

Interviewer: Erin Scudder

Interview Date:

Location: Online via Zoom

Length of Interview: 57:06 minutes

Transcript

Erin: Okay, so first questions are to do with personal history, identity and motivation. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself? What do you think is important for us to know about who you are, what you do, and how your experiences have informed your work?

Kath: I mean, I would say that's, that question is, there's kind of too much in that. I mean, let's just - I've sent you my CV, right?

Erin: Yes, yeah.

Kath: You can see in that sort of where I've been, right, and what I've done, right. Across my education, uneducational courses, things I've written, things I've produced, awards I've won and work I've done and performances I've done. So you've got this kind of full spectrum that dates back to the - what would be the earliest, is it like 1984?

Erin: 1981.

Kath: Yeah, right.

Erin: I think? Yeah that would make sense.

Kath: So yeah, right. So, you know, that's, I guess, all that stuff, where I've come, what I've diddly do, right?

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: Identity - an artist? Principally? I mean, I still think of 'disabilities' coming, just the next word after that.

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: So, if you could go like the Europeans do, where they put the adjective after the noun. If you could kind of go, 'I'm an artist disability', I'd be happy.

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: Because, kind of, the first thing is the creation of it. And as I look back over my creations, not all has been about disability, but it's been informed from there, you know.

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: What was the other thing? Motivation? Well, it's like breathing, isn't it? I mean, for those of us in arts - and I take that to be pretty much everything, including writing and, you know, all of it, you know, just all of it, right? It's the only thing we're good at. You know, really? When it gets down to it. I mean, I tried to study accounting at Sydney Uni in, in something - 197 ... 9. 1978 I did my HSC, which is the New South Wales equivalent of the Q - no, not the Q something - the VCE in Melbourne, the VCE in Victoria. Their final high school thing, right.

Erin: Okay yep.

Kath: So I did that in 78 and, when did I – I just tried to study accounting, I tried to study accounting, and I –

Erin: That's a brave move!

Kath: I know it's going to sound

unlikely, but, you know, I've never failed anything in my life. I've never failed anything, but I failed significantly with the third best failure of the year, my accounting exam, the first semester. And I stepped back. I looked at the results. I've never failed a thing, not even science tests. I was really bad at science at school.

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: I failed this exam and I sat back and I thought, right. It just never really made sense to me. I think it's anything I'm good at is kind of making things my preference, because there's lots of obviously different areas in which to work in arts, right? So and you can see I've been just about everywhere and done just about everything.

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: My favourite is to work with a team. I feel like peers.

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: Make a thing. And it doesn't to me, honestly, it doesn't matter what that thing is, whether it's a script, a TV show, a painting, a walk, a something. But it's going to be something where we're actively not just going for walk with the dogs, which is lovely.

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: That to make a thing, you know, it goes, goes beyond who's there. That's my favourite thing. And I don't care what is meant to come out of that from being a radio show through to a on site performance, whatever. Yeah, that's my favourite thing. That's my motivation. I guess I'm always looking for that sort of creative belonging place where we're all equal and making a thing, but a public thing, you know what I mean? It can't. Well, private things are nice too to be honest.

Erin: Yeah, but...

Kath: The aim is like how, how to project this beyond ourselves, whatever it is, could be useful.

Erin: So of all the things you've done, of all the made things and the the event, the the groupings that have been involved in making things, are there certain experiences that are like have been especially formative or have been like your favourites?

Kath: Abso-fucking-lutely. I'm like, yeah. Let me think about it ...

Erin: in terms of like getting you, I guess, more interested and involved in your creative practice. But -

Kath: Well I'd like to say, what doesn't, darling? What doesn't? You know what I mean?

Erin: Oh, you're on big screen.

Kath: Well. Formative. Fuck fuck me fuck. I probably should have taken notes, but it wouldn't all make sense. I mean, I'm now 61. I was born in 1961 and I'm 61. I find that really weird. Don't. Let's not go into the maths of that really. Like at some cosmic, some weird fucking thing. Formative.

Erin: Yeah. Yeah.

Kath: Oh, well. Well, when I was. How - could I guess your age? Are you 24?

Erin: No. I think Zoom is making me look younger. I'm the opposite of that. I'm 42.

Kath: Fuck a duck. I'm sorry. Oh, damn. This has been recorded, too. Okay. All right. Okay, So let's see, I think. I'm so different physically and graphically and visually and the way that I move because I was born with half my left arm, it's got like a little tiny elbow at the end and half my right leg. So I'm what we call a transverse congenital amputee. So it's across my body and from birth and who knows why. It's just one of those one of those things.

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: Actually, there's a long name for it but I'm not about to go into it because it's not that important. But so when I first started wanting to work in performance I just would find it really difficult to be in among my peers and as is still the case. So I started kind of, let's say, performing with people at high school actually in about 1973 when I was like 12 or something. I'm really bad at maths, I'm really bad ... numbers are just irrelevant or something.

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: It was really difficult to find a belonging place, to be honest and also weird. And I moved really weirdly. And even to this day there are very few drama roles or film roles or whatever, unless we write them. Written for people like me, yeah?

Erin: Yeah. So is that the main way that you created -

Kath: Yeah.

Erin: Your opportunities or like.

Kath: Yeah. Stuff for me.

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: And stuff. I worked like it took me years to be able to find the sort of community and the community has changed. And so what are what motivated me, really yeah was finding this kind of team of equals. I was really attracted to that idea of like a Bloomsbury school of intellectual dinner parties and games in my life. Like in Bondi and different times of my life. I've achieved that, but it never really lasts, but -

Erin: Yeah. Yeah, I was going to say, did you find it? Have you found it? Have you found them?

Kath: I found lots though along the way. To be honest, I've found lots of different belonging places, but they don't last for long. And maybe that's part of the journey too as an artist.

Erin: Yeah

Kath: You accept that the perfect environment for creativity doesn't last forever.

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: You know, to kind of take away with you and that. But look. About kind of know, was it about turning points?

Erin: Well, yeah. I mean, it's about basically the question. I so anything you want to say about like leading up because we'll get into present what you're doing at the moment next but like in the past leading up to now, like, like highlights but also like obstacles and turning points. Yeah. Like major points of, like, like for example, you said you failed accounting. That was maybe like a seminal moment. What are the other seminal moments?

Kath: I grew up in a right wing racist family. Oddly, people assume that, you know, in my family we all went around singing Marxist songs and stuff like that. But I grew up in a right wing, racist, white ish family in south western suburbs of Sydney. And. What can I say about that? I was believe it or not, I was secretary of my branch of the young liberals by the time I was 17. And that is not a joke. So we're in south western suburbs of Sydney.

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: Which is at the time a safe Labor seat, which really bothered my parents. Oh, my father ran for, you know, fascist at your loc- I'm serious. It was fascist at your local council and made us. This is hilarious too. So at my family house and the bus would turn around there that dropped us off from school. My father would insist on having vote fascist or whatever he stood for. I can't remember. It was probably [inaudible] right wing racist. I would call my dad a wannabe con man and he was unsuccessful bless him. But anyway, it was a very political environment and so I started attending Sydney University in 1979.

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: I topped my school in economics. I loved economics, still do. And on a whim, at that first signing up day in 1979, I ticked, "Yeah, I'll study political economics instead of straight economics". Because I had done straight economics very easily bored. And I

think that's essential for art. Is you've got to be essentially got this default position of boredom, which keeps like plowing you on to do the next thing.

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: So I ticked that just accidentally and, but that is when I really learned this other way of looking at the world. And so one of the first turning points in my life was leaving. I'd moved out into Erskineville and that was more like South Newtown in those days in this terrible little, little house. Two friends, one of whom was my brother. And I was heading off to uni 1979 winter, a fairly [inaudible] to get the bus from King Street up into the city and down was only a few blocks. But I always got buses, you know I'm not a great walker. Oh, yes, let's hike. And I pass this young lady pushing a pram with a baby. And the baby didn't have anything on its feet. And I – it was cold and I looked at the baby, looked at her, and she just passed me in the pram thing. And I thought, "Oh my God, this is how people live?" Because the week before I've been out on Sydney Harbour on the yacht, so and so who was the member for Hurstville or something in those days.

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: I can't remember the details. Sort of sneering at smaller boats passing us by. And then suddenly here I am and there's this woman and it changed my life because like that woman and her baby owe me heaps because I became a leftist at that point, I thought, Kath, this is Dreamland, this fucking, "We're the best people to rule forever. Utopian bloody nonsense" only applies to like in terms of the right wing, only about, oh, a couple of thousand of the giant population. Any one time is going to benefit from having those people in power, whereas the bulk of the people live like the lady with the pram. And so from that moment on I renounced. I went back home because when you're secretary you get all the files. I burnt them all back home and wrote this what I thought was excoriating resignation letter to the Liberal Party.

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: That really changed my life. And studying changed my life.

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: Fuck a duck. So many things, darling. I mean, attending. I'm going, just going to go staccato now and so won't make sense.

Erin: That's fine.

Kath: So we're starting from 1979 and moving to. I was lucky in 1979 to attend a short course sort of Buddhist training week, where during the course of the week we visited a hospital. We visited the morgue we visited a graveyard, we visited services, we talked about life through death. That was the most confronting thing at that point of my life. But such a great gift. I fell in love over and over and over and over, like over and over and over and over. Lived with all sorts of people. I've lived in 45 different places.

Erin: Wow.

Kath: Around Sydney and then up here and around. I just. I thought everyone did, you know, I didn't find that.

Erin: Yeah. I'm always surprised when people haven't moved. Moving is a big thing. It influences -

Kath: Believe it or not, in royal commission terms. Like in legal terms.

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: Moving around constantly is regarded as a sign or one of the, one of the signs. It's not obviously alone but of trauma and displacement and, and hurt like damage and stuff. Oh wow because when I look back on it - yeah. Anyway, anyway just throwing that out there. So back to the point. So I'm talking about, I left Sydney Uni the following year and decided to work and I worked in the Department of Immigration, so here am I, the great leftist decides I'm going to go for a job at the Department of Immigration. I have never seen anything like that. That was that was that was really that was. I can't even talk about that except that turned me off big public service blah forever.

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: I got I just kept moving through different places, but all the time I was starting to look for bigger groups for myself. I started, I started remember I was really early in the eighties, finding the spare. No, wasn't Spare Room. That was the British journal, this local feminist sort of journal that I've now forgotten the name of in Sydney, like Sisters Alone or something. And I started working with them and I started working with - it was called Theatre Australia. I worked on the last editions of Theatre Australia. I was just 21 by now.

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: I just knew there was something in creation for me and to be honest with you, I was aware that I was disabled. Like I was aware of it every day, but I hadn't worked out probably because my liberal right wing background, probably I hadn't worked out discrimination in my life. I hadn't worked out that. I was different. I mean, I knew I was different, but I hadn't worked out systemically.

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: Fairly late on.

Erin: Was that because it was sort of the environment you were raised and like at that point of view would be sort of –

Kath: Rugged individualism.

Erin: Talk about it or not talk about it in terms of discrimination?

Kath: Yeah. And, and rugged individualism conquers all that you must - it's all just up to you and you can find success will be yours and it's all kind of nonsense. But –

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: Was a systemic but another turning point was. I went to special school when I was a kid between the ages of sort of three, four in the special kindergarten. And then the time I escaped, like primary school, I was eight, nine, no school system for five or six years, something like that. And I thought disabled people were embarrassing like disabled people and sloppy food. I still can't watch people eat unless they really, really tidy and I prefer not to. And I went to school all these years with all these kids who are really messy eaters. Like I can't watch people eat.

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: Disgusting. But anyway, I really hadn't seen any disabled people since then and didn't want to. And so when I saw disabled people, I went cross roads to – it's really embarrassing.

Erin: I want to jump to these two questions that I feel like are tying into what you're saying.

Kath: Excellent. Go for it. Sorry to go on. I, I could go on -

Erin: No. This is great -

Kath: - forever.

Erin: It's like you're kind of answering the questions without me even having to ask them. There's one question here.

Kath: I did read them, but I have sort of forgotten.

Erin: Yeah, and they're pretty. They're pretty free range. One is, is your art political? So this kind of stemming from is your political. It's like a triple barrel question. So I'm just going to give it to you all at once. Is your art political? Do you think art should be political? Is that and this is a definition, I guess, of political creating change in how people think, act and treat each other, part of how we should define success.

Kath: Okay. For a start, never ask a question that could be answered by yes or no.

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: So? Because it just ends it. Then you have to follow up. So it's how is your art, political -

Erin: In which ways do you think your art is political?

Kath: Yeah. Yeah. See, I understand you, but it's also really direct way to go. Is your art political? I don't know. Anyway, just the journalist in me. As a journalist, you never ask a question that begins with yes or no. But as an academic you do. So is my art political? Yes. Should that be political? No. I love politics. I love it. I soak it up. If I'm not doing... if I'm doing anything, if I'm doing anything but talking to someone like you, I'll have something blurbing on about something political all the time, blah, blah, blah. I love it. so

Erin: What does political mean to you?

Kath: Society? Bigger than me?

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: Systemics [inaudible]. Money. Slavery. Systemic hierarchies.

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: And that to me is politics like and people and society like how all those systems interact.

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: So that pretty much includes everything. Pretty much includes everything. Which is, I think, why I find it so fascinating. I mean, I even find my own walls political, everything -

Erin: I find with everyone, it's something that everyone talks about differently. Some people talk about it. They mean government, you know, they mean that you are in politics. And I guess some people think of it as issues or some people think of it as like a particular stance. So I always wonder what people think of when they think of the word politics, which is kind of bundled into the question. When you say is your art political, it's like, what does that make you?

Kath: I mean, for me, the most political thing I have to draw on is myself. And so a lot of my visual arts are all self-portraits. I'm just fascinated by my form. And yeah, I kind of repeat it like I find it really fascinating and it's what's unique. It's what I can give that nobody else can give.

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: Yeah. Back to the question.

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: So. The question. Politics in work. Right. So. I loosely think because I'm doing it as political evenings. From a political perspective, let's say it's not part of the structure of doing it because I'm doing it. And like as you go about your business, how many one arm, one legged people do you see doing anything?

Erin: Hmm.

Kath: You know, so the fact that I'm doing it kind of makes the political whether I like it or not.

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: And.....but I think that art in its broadest sense, whether it's text, cakes, whatever, whatever it is that a person creates, right?

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: The, the politics of what everyone creates is informed by their own sort of unique perspective. And so I think all work is political. However, I think people mistake that as meaning it has to come from reality and that by default I say, no, no, no, no, no. A politic may be read into anything, but for an artist we have to have the freedom to do stuff that isn't necessarily directly about disability or directly about reality or true stories spilling our guts to the masses, which is what most of our work is. Like what I've paid for the most is to spill my guts and tell my story in heart-rending detail forever. Right? That's when you make most money from but also when you get sick of that and want to write a story about a butterfly.

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: Why can't my story about a butterfly be appreciated in the same way a non-disabled person's about butterfly would be? I'm not saying the butterfly markets will burn [inaudible].

Erin: Kind of is.

Kath: Yeah, I think we should be free to invent and not be hemmed in by politics. However, do not think for one moment that I will not bring my political whatever to your piece. So that doesn't. If that doesn't worry you, that's the way I prefer it.

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: You can't say, "Oh, no, my work is beyond politics" because that's a nonsense. It's like saying my life is beyond breathing. It isn't a thing, you know?

Erin: So in terms of how you identify as an artist, because you touched on this a bit like of all the possible ways of sort of like describing or categorising yourself or your art, do you want to be identified as Deaf, disabled, neurodiverse having first and then artist with pride?

Kath: It kind of changes for me.

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: Because like sometimes I think I'm a, you know, congenital amputate creative, at times I think I call myself super freak. Now I'm 61. I loved, I'd love people to think of me as super freak right now. Right. But it wouldn't have been as effective 40 years ago. You know, I would have seemed to be a bit too out there even now it might seem a bit too out there. Yeah, it changes. So. Yeah.

Erin: What changes it?

Kath: It's so deep. It's almost like religion. It's almost like we're talking about my religion. I'm not saying it's not your religion as well, but it's sort of touching on the deepest public parts of my life, you know?

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: What's the question again, sorry?

Erin: I guess I mean, the question is, is like how do you, and the answer can be different depending on different contexts, but how do you want to be described as an artist, or how do you describe yourself as an artist? Given that you know what you're saying around sometimes you have to spill your guts to make the most money or like tell your own - tell the story of your disability in your art. Whereas you might want to just make art, like you said, just do butterflies and be an artist and have the disability or whatever be, or the other ways in which you identify, be secondary to that.

Kath: Well, at my age, I've made a lot of money out of being a cripple amputee, slash, whatever. So it seems churlish for me then to say, "Oh no, I'm tough." I could be just could be anybody...

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: ...making a film about something or other and not lean on that because it's become part of my identity. I'm actually sort of proud of it. It's paid well I'm just going to be really blunt.

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: So it's a winner. And now, if you told me when I was five.

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: "Kath one day your disability, your arm and leg difference, etc., will be the best thing in your life." I would not have believed you for a second.

Erin: Yeah. Yeah.

Kath: But at this age, I look back and I think, my God, like it's been my ticket to a really interesting life. It's not as financially rewarding as some people's. I've always steered my own boat. Oh, my God. You know.

Erin: I can tell from your CV and you're telling me about accounting and things that aren't even on your CV. It's even bigger than -

Kath: Oh no, no, no. I have lovely accountants these days though. Bless them. I've got to send them a Christmas card this year. Anyway, that's what we're talking about? Sorry.

Erin: Talking about...

Kath: Finding yourself. Fuck. So. Look, I don't know, man. Like, super freak would be great. I'd love to be known respectfully, in an elder fashion as a super freak.

Erin: And what do you think like out there in the Disability Arts community? Like, what do you think? Do you think there's some agreement over these identification issues or do you think it's like extremely contested or what's your point of view on that, especially when it comes to artists who are intersectional and identify as queer as well or Indigenous?

Kath: So I decided right from the beginning of doing this interview with you guys that despite who may be on the committee, yeah, no, not the committee. We've

got the chair, what do you call it?

Erin: The steering committee?

Kath: The chair, the steering committee. Sorry. And. Etc., etc., etc.. Are the founders the this, the this, the that the other I care not a one whit for anyone's feelings and that I would in fact let rip if somebody said, "What do you think about the disability rights movement in Australia?"

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: So my answer to that is, it is shameful that in 2022....

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: Our unemployment as disabled and Deaf etc. people our unemployment rate stands at about 60%.

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: 50% 50%. And of those 50% 60% live on or below the poverty line.

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: It is shameful that an organisation - not an organisation that a network of what started as a great community idea has swollen to become very formative and influential. So we're talking about disability arts organisations in general across Australia. But so the first one I got involved with was the mid eighties, by then with what are they called in New South Wales? Accessible Arts.

Erin: Ok. Yeah.

Kath: They've called it the same thing for a while.

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: But you know, those great moments like highlights turning points, I think I have to turn that into a bit of an email and give you. Is that acceptable to give you really, because this is huge ones. I could just go on and they don't even have to be personal. Anyway, sorry, back to the thing. Accessible Arts in New South Wales. So at the time Accessible Arts was run by a non-disabled person who became a good friend and good on her who ... called Jane Connor who, or maybe Jane Connors. I can't remember the last part of her name going to pick Connor and Connors after that.... Helen Connors. It was Helen Connors. Helen Connors. It's not Jane. And we thought it was normal. By the time I met her, I think it was 84.

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: That it was normal to be a non-disabled head of a disability service, though, actually, Helen, in her own way, did in a lot of ways. I mean, I don't mean to name anyone particularly over this, but around things like mental illness, mental health issues. It's a shame that the stigma which applied then still applies now. That's all I'm going to say because I'm not actually quite sure what was going on there. But believe it or not, one of the early disability arts projects I worked on, on video, on an image thing, credit thing, I actually described myself as non-disabled assistance. Me. What was it, 1985?

Erin: And you were asked to describe yourself that way?

Kath: That's how I did in 1985. It might be 86. It's a video that I made with a whole bunch of guys from the Australian Quadriplegics Association in Sydney at Maroubra. Long story. Great story, actually.

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: But one of the credits, because I was a video student at UTS by then, and the credits had the list of the guys who made the videos, about ten of them or something, and Non-disabled Assistance by Kath Duncan and somebody else. Can't remember who the other one. Can you imagine me saying that about myself? Fuck-a-duck anyway. So I guess I'm just saying my identity's really changed over time.

Erin: Yeah, Yeah.

Kath: Depending on the things because I'm one thing. So I left my parents and a sort of an insecure middle class. Let's indebt ourselves for millions and look like we're actually better off than we are and end up having to flog everything sort of white existence that we're all familiar with family. So despite all that it took me a long time to work out that defining myself with my disabilities was a political ... and I met Carly Wild. I met Carly Wild, who was the first person I'd met with short arms from thalidomide about my age, just a little bit older, but about my age.

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: Who was cool with cool dyke haircut in Sydney when I was working for Triple J, covering a story about this big - I got the soft stories like the dog show stories, but this particular one was kind of some day of something and a whole lot of stalls, just an information day. So they wanted just to grab short grabs about, hey, you could, if you find yourself at such and such and you need something, go to something and a little interview, you know, that's the thing, right?

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: Carly Wilde was standing behind a stall with her little short arms, with this groovy dyke haircut and just being just the most wonderful person. And it was just the first disabled person I'd met since I'd run screaming away from special school. Long story. I made a play about it. Must read it someday.

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: But um that was cool and groovy. And she was full of politics, a different politics because I was so feminist by then, but then feminist up against the wall, blah, all this. So I hadn't kind of drawn that line to myself as a disabled person about discrimination, empowerment -

Erin: Right?

Kath: Social structures, blah, blah, blah around disability. Having identified a lot with all the stuff about women.

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: And so Carly did things like drag me off to this terrible conference in Sydney. That was like some big conference thing. So how did I get politicised as a cripple? Probably. I went to I did most of my degree at UTS and I went to film school in 1989, just as we were in Australia and the rest of the world going through an analogue into digital storage and manipulation like revolution though, kind of crossing over on sprocket and all that. But and filmed on Bolex is the 16mm camera, you know, and Super Eight.

Erin: Oh wow.

Kath: And early video cameras which had this enormous tape thing, you know with inside a giant box that weighed, I don't know, five kilos at least those are the days but yeah, I think. When I was at AFTRS in 1989, I started to have nightmares about being back in the special school that I'd escaped from....

Erin: Yeah,

Kath: ...kind of stayed with me. But it's not the trip to the counselor who I've - Look, I tell you, there's nothing better for a disabled life than decent counselling. I've done 12 since I was 23. Really recommend it. Can't recommend it enough. But back to the point. How do I identify? Fuck-a-duck. So back to Disability Arts. I think we should get cracking on some of that. It is shameful in 2-0-2-2.

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: Employment rate is shit and the sector of Disability Arts is still largely run by non-disabled people.

Erin: Yeah. [inaudible] talks about. Yeah.

Kath: A way forward here that we should insist that organisations, whether they're creative, cultural or whatever, being run by and managed by disabled people and we can do that by -

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: We may have to bring that - I'm really shocked that across Disability Arts organisations from state to state, with the exception of South Australia, New South Wales and Victoria. Well, actually, Queensland's a bit of an uncertain one because that's Pat Swell and I'm not quite sure how she identifies, but I'm pretty sure she has identified to my face as being non-disabled. Not sure how she identifies now. But anyway, so WA, Queensland and etc. are largely managed and staffed by non-disabled people is a complete travesty. All those staff members should be training people to take their jobs and they should have done that 20 years ago.

Erin: Yeah,

Kath: A 50 year run is just disgraceful.

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: Just because, however, just because you have got a Deaf or disabled person with the key job doesn't mean that you actually get an inclusive –

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: Workforce. Like we have to get critical numbers up to have any influence. And it's shameful that, you know, the dreams of 1972. If we go back 50 years and think of the dreams of 1972 about the resurgence of a creative, culturally diverse, Australia just sort of died after '75. So it sort of faded away. And then even the so-called left in Australia, you know, supported the dismantling of universities and the craving for having to get your funding from overseas or just anywhere else or whatever –

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: Places of learning, closing down TAFE, all the rest of it. Us arts workers and within the us disabled arts workers have had a terrible time surviving for the last year. But this heyday then a bit of a heyday in the early eighties, like believe it or not, we actually believed that.... we killed the right forever with, like anti-discrimination legislation, affirmative action legislation and stuff like that. There wasn't a lot happening in the disability sector, to be honest, but we thought we'd kind of killed the right and we didn't. They've been there all along, and right now we're still really battling for survival as artists and disabled people.

Erin: So I've got this question here which you talked about, and it's kind of. Just rip into it. The question is, what do you think the public would say are the key milestones or big major happenings in the history of Disability Arts in Australia? But I want to say, based on what you're telling me as well. Like, what do you think are the major failures or the major disappointments?

Kath: It's funny how kind of the triumphs sort of sit with the disappointments, isn't it? Sort of over time. I was just thinking about the - so what do the public thinks? Is that how that one starts?

Erin: Is how it's worded.

Kath: Couldn't give a fuck. What do I think?

Erin: Yeah. And maybe what do others in the Disability Arts community. So it's like three there's a public there's you personally and then your community for you.

Kath: I'm a real performance bug. Like performance really does it for me. Nothing else really does. And so I was just remembering like as a bit of a highlight Gaelle Mellis did this great show in South Australia called "Take Up Thy Bed and Walk" and -

Erin: "Take Up My Bed and Walk."

Kath: "Take Up Thy Bed and Walk" in South Australia. In the early 2000s I think it might have been either can't quite or might have been might have been a bit late. It might have been something like 2011. Just can't quite remember. But I remember going to

that, which was the first time I'd seen a tactile tour engage with an audio thing and holding fancy things as you walked in and this and that and it all being very magical and blah blah, blah had ever seen. I really thought theatre would change forever.

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: After that. There's these great highlights. But they followed by sort of disappointment that this great thing didn't happen. So.

Erin: Or didn't get that or didn't achieve the change that you thought it might? [inaudible].

Kath: Yeah. I never know how to read these values politically, personally or whatever, because I think there's an interest in nondisabled people maintaining control over the Disability Arts sector. Looking at it like point one in particular, but there is this sense of sitting on this goldmine of untapped talent. And because we feature so low on, let's say, drama classes in the suburbs, which I attended as a young kid, but you know, you have to be able to get to and be confident walking there. I walked in there with my sisters and my brother, so it was like a team of us, you know, that you know to be able to do that is kind of rare.

Erin: Hmm.

Kath: I think that a failure would be that we didn't really get the outcomes like a free education. I complained to what's that really lovely guy - Alastair ...I can't remember his surname. The guy who's the new disability something commissioner. I think it's for the state or is it a national job? [Inaudible].

Erin: So I have to look it up.

Kath: Absolutely drop dead gorgeous. He's an absolute honey bunch. This Deaf guy who's now the disability something commissioner. But it might just be Victoria. But anyway, I argued to him that HECS should be free for disabled people, you know, like the whole thing. HECS, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. So few of us do it. But you know if you're just a kind of a kid with no money like me, like a kid with a squandering sort of

family who believed they were better than they really were getting university education has changed my life over and over and over. Getting whatever education I could get has changed my life over and over and just opened up pathways that I couldn't have got without Mummy and Daddy's help. We all know people who got to wherever they are, you know, with Mummy and Daddy's help, but through university. So I think all that should be free. It's so difficult to kind of pinpoint exact sort of moments, I guess, or.

Erin: The economic thing is a big thing that I'd love to talk about more. Like you said, why aren't there more disabled artists participating in community classes and things and, you know. Yeah. Just how do you, how do you even support yourself as an adult to have enough money to go and do those things? Or how do you have time outside of your job that you're working to earn money to be able to go to them?

Kath: Well you don't. I mean, I kind of got a bit lucky. I got this beautiful tax free, \$25,000 about two years ago, and then I won a tax-free legal settlement earlier this year for a substantial amount, I mean, not hundreds of thousands, but you know for a substantial amount. And I just like to take the year off because for once, I actually have this tax-free amount of money, so I don't have to declare it to anyone and I can just do what I like. As it turns out, I've worked a bit now that life is coming back post-COVID, but ordinarily it's unsurvivable. But at the same time, you know, you have to be a good team player. I survived all those years because I could work in most share households. I could make friendships and colleagues across organisations that I could then you know, rely on other jobs or other moments. You know, I never was so much of a cunt that I no one would work with me, you know what I mean. But so this is really difficult to talk about because I'm thinking about this as an artist. I'm not thinking about this as a disabled artist necessarily, like all the way through it. So the kind of... It's such a big topic. Sorry, I know it's hard to talk about all this stuff.

Erin: It's, it's such a big topic to try to ask the questions.

Kath: I know.

Erin: [Inaudible] forever.

Kath: And it might be easier to talk to someone who's younger, you know what I mean? Because I've just got like a lot of different stories. A turning point for me was when I attended my first Disabled People's exhibition that Helen Connors had organised in Sydney for Accessible Arts in Surry Hills, which is really close to the CBD. Quite a groovy sort of area even then. And I was a bit like, oh yeah, I'll turn up because it's the good thing to do. But the art was just like. Wow. Like I now I kind of understood this is like, maybe this is now 1985. I kind of could understand why working across impairment. No it was probably later than that, but whatever anyway. But like it is all a blur. But yeah, the ... gosh. I mean, how do how do you encapsulate this stuff? You know, so hard, it's like I've just got snapshots in my head of my -

Erin: I think staccato, the staccato flow of consciousness is the best way of just getting this information out there. I don't know in particular, what's you know

Kath: Like....

Erin: I'm just enjoying all the stories.

Kath: I remember thinking that it was going to be really difficult for me to participate in arts when I attended an arts workshop in 1982 '83, really early on. And I was up the front doing something, and I got this tap on my shoulder and asked me to move to the back because my movements were disrupting other people. I remember finding that really humiliating, and I just couldn't some things I just, I would end up being the only disabled person at a thing. And I found that really hard. I really did find it hard. And lots of people ask questions and it's just like, do we have to talk about that? It just goes on and on and on and I feel sort of obliged to talk about it, but I think I think there's a lot of healing to be done. At the moment, I'm really sick of this kind of notion of leadership courses. I actually think a lot of disabled and Deaf artists need team player courses because a lot of us have to be leaders in our own lives. Putting my leg on and off. I'm the only person to do that ... open the door in the way. I'm the only person that can do that. da-duh-da-duh-da-duh all these, a lot of the time we're leading, even if there's not other people there. But a lot of the time we don't get the team player experiences. It's like when I was a kid I wasn't allowed to play sports. It'd be more humiliating if I was fucked at something. It would have been really good for me to have been fucked at stuff then. That's what I'm saying now would have been really good to be fucked, like

everyone else got the chance to fail and was excluded from because apparently it would really embarrassing to watch a disabled kid fail. Anyway.

Erin: Yeah,

Kath: I'm really big on. We need more of a team player -

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: Sort of mentality. Because I do come from this, you know, sort of post hippie, living equally, share the Earth, eat organic, which I do all this [inaudible]... and so I'm not used to a more competitive world, I don't really get it. I don't really get some stuff that seems to motivate a lot of people. Yeah, I recently did this young person's thing. It's like young person's creative project. That was so weird. These people wanted to talk about kind of people like Jeffree Star and like YouTubers. I'm like, "why are we talking about this? Why are we talking about this? how we talk about what we're doing."

Erin: What do you think? Who do you think's amazing that you've worked with or that you've seen that people need to know more about?

Kath: Oh, my God. Disabled or not?

Erin: Disabled or not. Yeah. It's up to you.

Kath: Oh. A great workshop was, I think it was 2015 in Perth with Jenny Sealey. And I think Sarah [inaudible] as part of the DADAA and Perth International Arts Festival and somebody else, some British thing maybe was associated with that and that was the biggest dramatic workshop I've attended. I think it was three and a half days at Fremantle, then the old DADAA offices or something, and that was just amazing. Yeah, that. I don't think we and Covid hasn't helped a lot of us artists don't get a chance to work together so you can get quite isolated.

Erin: Yes.

Kath: Who would I work with again? Well, Bumpy Favell was my co-producer-y person. She's another disabled person. Different conditions –

Erin: She's on my interview list.

Kath: Are you serious?

Erin: Yeah. I'm like, you're on my list.

Kath: Wow, I didn't know that. Who else do I think is, like, really cool to work with? I'd love to work again – oh these non-disabled people. It's funny. So I assess a lot of grants applications done a lot of that over the last few years. So now I've probably assessed 20 different assessment things, panels for different Creative VIC and different groups and this and that. And so I've got to see a lot of people's dreams and hopes, and some of them are targeted, Deaf and disabled people's specific applications. It's amazing. Many of us choose to work with non-disabled people because they are so shit at team playing, team playing, team playing, team play.

Erin: Do you think that's because -

Kath: We don't get the experiences darling. We don't get the opportunities.

Erin: I see so many disabled artists bios where they also identify as disability advocates. And I often wonder, is that by choice or because you have been sort of forced to advocate for yourself so much and to be to lead individually in that sense where you have to always barter for yourself. Do you think that sort of causes us to sort of miss out on?

Kath: Yeah.

Erin: Forced into leadership.

Kath: Yeah, yeah, yeah. No, definitely.

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: But I would say again. Don't ever ask a question that can be answered with yes or no.

Erin: I know. I know. I've got to work on my rephrasing.

Kath: Because by the time I've agreed to it I've actually forgotten what the point. Like what - Sorry about that. So you could say, like, how do you feel something intersects with something?

Erin: Yeah. How do you feel about being, I guess, forced into leadership positions all the time?

Kath: Well, see, I would argue I don't think I'm forced enough.

Erin: Hmm.

Kath: I actually think - from what I can see, you know, leaders like, are not leading. So, no, I would love to have some opportunities, particularly before I get completely demented and aged and dead and stuff. I would love to have more opportunities for leading. Would really love it. I feel quite often in leading. What it's really about is being really good at negotiating and setting boundaries. Like I've a few projects where I have led. I've loved to set boundaries about what I think your role is. Do you think that's what your role is? And what I think this role is. Do you think – what my role is and we kind of talk about that and I really enjoy that sort of discussion. So, yeah, no, I don't think I get asked nearly enough. I think I'm quite often always the servant, to be honest.

Erin: Hmm.

Kath: I don't see a lot of teams either. They're much more common way of working, like collective working in the eighties than they are now. And these days there's this Oh, no. But what's the hierarchy? Oh, that's the hierarchy. So that rulebook is going to help us. I don't think it does.

Erin: Yeah. What do you think about the potential for, like allies or non-disabled people to be included in this archive?

Kath: Well, I think I would argue, unfortunately, a lot of them have a lot to share from their experiences because there have been heaps of non-disabled people involved in Disability Arts you know to their shame and to each of them I would say, "What have you done about getting disabled people in your jobs? Tell me, what have you done?"

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: Or why haven't you?

Erin: Or what haven't you done? Yeah.

Kath: Yeah. No, I think that's fair enough, unfortunately.

Erin: Yeah. I want to ask you, because we're almost - we've got, like, 4 minutes.

Kath: Yeah, no, ask me something. I'm sorry. I've rambled and I read the questions and everything, but we're into religion in a kind of -

Erin: I'm going to ask you to ramble even more because I want to ask you, like, what? What should I have asked you? What have I forgotten to ask?

Kath: Fuck. No, I don't think you've forgotten anything.

Erin: What would you like to say? What would you add?

Kath: Well, I feel like I've watched the beginning of a birth of a movement. I. So in 1980 something, I must have been really out of it or something. I attended the first meeting of the National Group of Disability Arts orgs in I think it was Melbourne, Helen Connors and I flew down to Melbourne. I'm pretty sure I saw the Melbourne and Sydney and what's his name? He's still fucking there. I like David from WA. He was there and I think others have all changed. But everyone was there like from everywhere.

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: Why is there no Tasmanian disability arts org?

Erin: Good point. And I wonder...

Kath: And Canberra, Canberra's only got go in the last ten years or so. You know what I mean it's sort of catch up. Not that those orgs offer everything and but I've been talking to Arts Access here in Victoria now for quite some time and I've been talking about grants in particular like helping people grant applications because that's one really good service they can pull is getting money. Like for me, I love economics. Money is the root of all beauty. Without money, none of us can be artists. I'm sorry. I mean, it's great to grub around. I've done it. God damn, I've grubbed around forever on scraps of this and that. But really what we need is, is money.

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: And, you know, and to eliminate people standing in our way. I mean, you know, I'd love some revolution. I really would. I'd love some rev- well South Australia's an example back in 20 years ago, 15 years ago when they threw out their non disability led arts org managers.

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: Got rid of them completely and set up a new org. Didn't quite go as planned after that, you know never does, but they set this example there you know and I'm not saying let's sack all Disability Arts org people blah blah blah but you know if we're going to be walking the walk, talking the talk. That's probably ableist, isn't it? All that's ableist. If we're going to be making meaningful legacy –

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: We need to share the joy. We need to share the the money, power around sorry, full stop, end of. That's just what we need to do. What was the question?

Erin: The question was, what would you like to say?

Kath: Right. Right. Okay. I've gone through that. I hate leadership. I fucking hate it. My God, if I could, I'd love. That's my next essay, I think is how shit leadership is. And I've done some woeful courses. Oh, my fucking God. And I'd also like to say, of all the people that you know....

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: ... have done these leadership courses, have any single one of them achieved any more after that than they did before. And you know what the answer is? No.

Erin: No.

Kath: It's absolutely - I know it needs to be so.

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: So anyway, back to the back to the what else? Look, we've got a long road to hoe here. I think it's really amazing that projects like this are initiated.

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: And, I'm really, excited that for once I get to testify.

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: Disability Arts in Australia at a time when I don't know how much longer I'm going to be around for, you know what I mean? Like, I want to be able to testify that.

Erin: I think we'll just need to follow up. I mean, I don't want to commit to like ten more interviews, which I'm sure we could do, but I think we'll have to follow up with, like...

Kath: I think milestones and values is what I think is we're still missing to talk about. And I think that's an email because I know what I'm like. I'm going to go that one, well,

that one a blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. You know what I mean? Like text and just slides almost, you know?

Erin: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Milestones and failures and sort of like you were mentioning with South Australia, like successes that have been successes, but maybe not like haven't fully bloomed in the way they haven't maybe met their potential.

Kath: And that's not just, that's not just about us as well. It's about Australia. I remember the thing I hate about leadership courses the most leadership courses are about that the problems with us. Oh, you just need to be a better leader and then it's all sorted. No, no, no, no, no, no. The system needs to change.

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: And we need to be better team players.

Erin: Yeah. Including leaders. Yeah. All right.

Kath: That's my statement.

Erin: Yeah.

Kath: I could say much more. It's just been a ride.

Erin: I hope I get a chance to - I'll stop recording now. Thank you.