

Raquel

This horizontal conversation was recorded at Somerset House in April 2023. It was recorded in Gallery 31 during Christine Sun Kim's exhibition Edges of Sign Language, Alannah Chance and I talk really honestly about rest and about unclipping from clock time. We talk about time as a construct and the well body as a construct. We talk about soft life - a podcast series Alannah was recording at the time. And at one point we audio describe Christine Sun Kim's exhibition. I hope you enjoy the conversation.

I'm laying here with the producer Alannah Chance, in Gallery 31, looking up at the ceiling, which is painted like a dark grey with an ornamental edge to it. It's a beautiful sunny day in London. And we can see the blue sky and the flag out the the big Georgian windows, I think they're Georgian the architecture here. And the floor we're lying on is a wooden floor. And then we've got yoga mats. What are you aware of right now like, in your body - what feels - what are you aware of lying down.

Alannah

I was just becoming aware of a different quality of listening. When you're not facing each other, I think like more space, because your bodies are in a different relationship. So there's more, more time and more space. And that has an effect on my listening I think. Does that make sense?

Raquel

Yeah, totally. There's - we're looking up at the same ceiling and there's a lot of space above us to hold time and thoughts.

Alannah

Do you do horizontal conversations? Is it part of what you do?

Raquel

Yeah, it's part of my practice. I started doing them in 2018 during Mayfest, which is a festival of contemporary theatre in Bristol, and I invited some of the visiting artists to have a horizontal conversation with me in public at the Arnolfini gallery in exchange for a coffee. So something I asked everybody - and that I'd love to ask you as well - is if rest is part of your daily work or practice. And I heard from theatre makers about using the dream space - one person talked in particular about trying to stretch out the state that they wake up in where they're in between sleeping and being awake. And that being when they did some of their best writing. So they would try not to wake up quickly and stretch that period out and

write from bed or write from the sofa. And I thought it would be so interesting for a lot of the people that I work with, who live with chronic illness or disability, to also know about those practices of writing from rest that other artists use even though they might not need to.

Alannah

Yeah, that's a great, isn't it? There's a meme about Ursula Le Guin's writing schedule I saw recently. And the first thing is 'wake up, don't do anything' - she's scheduled that in! And it says like don't even think about doing anything yet. This bit is for lying flat and looking at the ceiling. And then she starts writing. I mean, there's something about those spaces, maybe spaces before you become aware of social norms. It almost feels like a refuge where you're kind of tricking the self into a time or carving out a space which is for you. And hiding from all of the pressures that we're under to be productive and to get up and you know the self talk, which is highly socialised, which tells us of all the things we should be doing. That feels like a kind of, yeah, like a refuge or practice or fugitive. Or a trick - there's a Trickster mentality there that I quite like the idea of.

Raquel

Yeah, I love the word refuge, that's a really good word. My refuge is sort of slightly later in the morning, because I love tea! So I like to get up and have a cup of tea quite early, but then I have a refuge, a rest between about 10 and 11. And then another rest in the afternoon. It's a time for - for me that rest practice is about coming into my body, into deep time, and also doing some stretches and a little bit of movement in the morning. And then in the afternoon it tends to be more like bed practice. So I might be daydreaming from bed, or reading from bed or listening to an audiobook in bed, but it's my body needing that horizontal refuge for about 40 minutes.

Alannah

Really being able to lean into those times and place them in a priority part of your schedule. Did that take practice? because I think when I think of rest, it's rest from myself.

Raquel

Rest from yourself?

Alannah

Yeah, that's the thing I need (laughs)

Raquel

Tell me about that -

Alannah

Because in order to kind of really rest without value placed on the rest, without falling again, into the trap of productive rest, or even kind of monetised self care, I feel like I need to pause part of my programming, which is so intrinsically linked to being productive and to kind of use value of something, even if it's not my own productivity, it's like 'this thing is a useful thing, so I'm going to, you know' - somehow it's a resource and I'm going to capitalise on this. And I feel like the rest that I'd really need is a rest of that entire way of thinking. And that's, that's tough. That's a quite a tough thing to be able to do, I guess.

Raquel

I think ritual helps. So I normally put music on, I put incense on. And there's something even just about setting two or three things up - now I've done it so many times that signals to myself that I'm going into a different mode.

Alannah

That window is mad, isn't it?

Raquel

It's beautiful. So beautiful.

Alannah

There's some great warping going on. It's like the flag is really at the top of the - it's great what you notice! From this perspective -

Raquel

Yeah, I feel like I spend a lot of time looking at ceilings and looking at the undersides of things that normally don't get noticed. I mean that literally and also metaphorically, I guess. Is your sense of self any different lying down having this conversation?

Alannah

It feels very subversive, in a way that is bizarre. For a small act it feels very political - with a small p. I guess it does relate to the same sorts of things around soft life: how **softness has a 'steely edge to it' or is inherently political**. Just doing something from a different angle that is not normative is a kind of a statement. But I think with the self, it feels like a quieting of the expectations of others of the self.

To not like, for example, people coming into the gallery, to avoid the temptation to be like "Well, alright! Get up now and be normal!" you know? "like oh, they're probably wondering what..." - it's a sort of stillness. There's a grounding quality to it, which is like centering yourself somehow beyond the social expectations of what you should be doing in a space. If that makes sense.

Raquel

I want to project on play because I think rest and play together is - I mean, it relates to soft life and to subverting things and to developing inclusive practice and that idea of pleasure activism. So I think rest and play together would be really interesting.

Alannah

Yeah, yeah, definitely. And time, I mean, they're also intermingled - how time opens up in rest actually, uncoupling time from clock time. But what were you talking about space time?

Raquel

Yeah, I mean, I'm starting to learn a little bit about the science of time. And there is no universal time. So each of us, even though the differences are incredibly tiny, each of us does exist in our own space time. And for some reason, that feels freeing. That feels like unlinking from the clock time, unclipping from it maybe. It feels like an invitation to be more playful with how I think about time.

Alannah

Yeah, time is just a mind blowing human construct. I'm interested in talking to people about time, who don't actually live in clock time, because it isn't a universal.

Raquel

Who have you found who doesn't live in clock time?

Alannah

Well, that's a very good question, thank you for asking (laughter). I want to talk to gardeners, farmers. I mean, it's not that they are without the world, but they have very clear demarcations of time, which are beyond the clock. And I think people who work with natural cycles. I mean, babies is the other - the clock doesn't exist, it's just what the body needs. I was talking to an experimental psychologist about time and she was saying, we know our time, our perception of time, our experience of time changes. And so body time - our bodily experience of time - is

very, very different to the clock. And then our memory of time is very different to the clock again. So the clock doesn't really map on to anything we experience - it just highlights that it is a construct that we've made an order to synchronise everything and in order to create a kind of continuous system. But I think in the pandemic we knew that in our bodies, or we noticed something in our bodies. Everyone was talking about time. And what she was saying was fascinating - that it highlights how time is relational. So the quality of your relationships determine the speed with which time goes forward.

Raquel

Was it simplistic? Is it like, people you have good relationships with time flies? and with -

Alannah

Essentially yeah, like the more isolated you are, the longer time is, and the more aware of time you become. So essentially, when you're not aware of time, time doesn't exist. And when you're very aware of time, time slows down. Which we sort of know, right? We know all those things. And because life stopped, but time continued over the pandemic, we suddenly were jolted, I think, in our bodies, into an understanding of like, what time? What is the time? What's happened to time? I think that was quite a psychedelic thing that I feel like I want to keep hold of. And that's beyond you know, once we start to talk about value of time and how we spend our time. Just the feeling of it in our bodies was kind of warped from that experience I think.

Alannah

(Change of thought) I'm interested in that, I mean from a sort of Somerset House angle - how bodies behave in art institutions, adult adults at least, and how regimented it is in spaces that are conceptually free, or could have, you know, something quite controversial and edgy in the space. But the policing of the public is very stark.

Raquel

I think absolutely, our behaviour is coded in different spaces, in art spaces or in kind of older or grander spaces. Yeah. And I think the public, we police one another as well in those spaces.

When I did a survey and asked people what would make their local art venue like really, truly accessible to them, there was a lot that came up around there not being any good seating in galleries. There are benches, but they don't have a backrest. And they're generally tiny, like the one here - they're only for tiny

bottoms. So a lot came up around better seating in art spaces. It's tricky because I think what art galleries try to do for the artist is present their work in a really sort of clean, sparse, pared back environment. And I think that has dominated the way that visual artworks are presented. But for an audience, that often means it feels like quite a cold space, and a space that - if you watch a group of people in a gallery people, will generally spend a few minutes in front of an artwork and then go to the next one and go to the next one. It's like a quite predictable rhythm. I think the artists would actually like people to engage with the artwork more deeply. And the art galleries also. So if we want that we sort of need to build more inviting spaces for people to do that in.

Alannah

Yeah, totally. That's fascinating about the seating. It feels like a space of the head. Not a space of the body. And the body is in the way in a space like that. Yeah, kind of denigrated. Because it's like "hmm this is about ideas" (tone mimics 'highbrow'). "So, that's a bit lower than the level of ideas".

Raquel

Yeah, I know that Gaylene Gould has been doing a lot of work around how do you feel? like asking people how does an artwork make you feel? How do you feel in gallery spaces? So to try and engage with the artwork with your whole body, with all of you and not just with the conceptual parts of you. And I think that's what rest enables. Because rest brings you back to that more corporeal, more kind of whole body sense.

Alannah

Yeah, definitely. This is soft life, soft life embodied.
So shall we talk about the? Given that?

Raquel

Yeah, we're in Gallery 31 with Christine Sun Kim's new exhibition, which is called...

Alannah

Edges of sign language

Raquel

Edges of sign language. There are four pieces. They are sign language represented in a visual form. These canvases are sign language enlarged. And they're quite minimal. Because I think she's focusing on the shape and the space of that language. And so there are four signs: one is for Echo, one is for All Day All Night.

Which is kind of like a half circle overlapping with another half circle. But it's actually much more nuanced and intricate than that, the edging is more like a landscape, like the edge of land where it meets the sea.

Alannah

How do you feel resting with it?

Raquel

I'm kind of, at once aware of what the artist is working with and kind of wanting me to think about - the physical space of language. But they're also very kind of organic shapes. So they feel like 'pals', like the outlines of other landscapes or mammals to rest with. I'm very aware of the distance between me and the different artworks, and their edges and the shadows that are created by the natural light and the light in the gallery space. And how kind of subtle they are, in a way. The canvas is unpainted, so it's a kind of soft beige against a stark white wall. But we are surrounded by these four in a very beautiful way. We've got All on our left, and then we've got Echo to our left and up. And then we've got All Day All Night beyond our heads and Score on our right.

Alannah

They're very soft,

Raquel

Hmm, they are. And I can get really dreamy and feel like we're all on a voyage somewhere, especially this one makes me feel like we're kind of swimming towards the windows or the light together. We're just spending time together. And maybe that is a really anti capitalist gesture. It's like we're spending time together in a non transactional way. I haven't come here to get any cultural currency from this. I'm just here with you and with this artwork and with this space. We're just giving time to one another, which maybe links to Johanna Hedva's work - in Sick Woman Theory they wrote about how they used to think the most anti-capitalist gesture left to us is to love or to write love poetry. But their thinking shifted and then they felt like to care for yourself or for someone else is the most anti capitalist gesture. I think sharing time and giving time to one another is also a really anti capitalist gesture.

Alannah

Yeah, it's a really lovely image, the sort of travelling, travelling out to the window with these pals. Because the one on our left, in particular -

Raquel

This one? Score? You could read it as having a particular direction and momentum.

Alannah

But you spend time with rather than consume from this perspective. You spend time with and you share, there's something- it feels like there's a quality? And particularly artworks that you know, aren't in your home, you can visit somewhere to see some caged beasts. And then you read the blurb and you think "Yeah, okay. Good. That was really, that was great." And you know what I mean? You sort of don't really have time - again, it comes down to time - but you don't absorb so much through your other senses, which I think you do get through spending time, which again, is just another way of untethering the way you think from this use value or like consumption model, really.

Raquel

I think by spending time and resting with things, like the surface area of what we have available to engage with it, like multiplies thousandfold rather than just taking something in through our eyes or ears or the more conceptual parts of us. And for it to be able to land in you I guess.

Alannah

Definitely. Yeah. I'm really fascinated by that. **Which is what I was talking about the beginning, that relationship between rest and listening. And even just being horizontal and the body having a different relationship to the other, the quality of listening is opened up.** There was a great quote or concept really that inspired 'soft life' - when I was thinking about it. I was reading Dr. Bayo Okomolafe - who's in the series. **And he talks about the fertile crack and how cracks are generative. He sees the pandemic as one of, or you know crises in general can be cracks, they create a crack in the system. And through that crack, other systems emerge and new fertile ideas emerge. It just strikes me how that can be on several different levels. The things that we see as divergent can be the most interesting spaces to talk about the centre.**

I wanted to ask you actually about the well body? what the well body -

Raquel

(laughter) that's a can of worms!

Alannah

How long have we got? five minutes? the well body, go! But just these sort of normative ideas of health of all the body, perhaps is the problem?

Raquel

Yeah, I mean, it's like everything we've sort of talked about, there's no standard. There's this mythical standard that we design around - like in architecture there's a standard body. And yeah, what is the well body? I mean, what is hyper functionality? It depends on how I'm judging it - like hyper functional in a work sense? or in a sense of how fulfilled my life is and how connected I am and how well I'm functioning FOR ME. I don't know what I think about the well body. I think the well body is a temporary state that we are privileged to have sometimes. I don't even really want there to be a binary between a well body and a sick body - there are bodies! (sense of a full stop).

Alannah

Right? That continually fluctuate -

Raquel

So yes, soft life has got to be about that too. Hasn't it? That fluidity, precarity, changing nature of things, things constantly shifting and in flux. So I have certain predictable things around my pain flare ups. But actually, that there's so much of me that is - well so much of all of us - that is yeah, in constant flux. And soft life is a - (change of thought) I love the person you were talking to who talks about indecision. I feel so relieved when we celebrate all of that and just bring all of that into the room rather than kind of rolling out this trope of professionalism or like functionality. I'm gonna have to think about the well body - I don't think I think about the world body very often.

Alannah

I don't think it exists (whispered), it's a unicorn (laughter) -

Raquel

Or it exists in tiny leap seconds, between many, many other seconds.

Alannah

I'm looking at that flag. And that's the well body - you know that it exists as a flag in your head that has a form, but it's continually changed by the elements. And the window that I'm looking at the flag through is completely warped. So it's distorted based on my own lenses. I'm just like, maybe that's the perfect metaphor - that's the well body there?

Raquel

I think that is a perfect place to finish this conversation. Thank you so much for doing that with me.

Alannah

Oh, thank you!

Raquel

For most of this conversation I've been pretty much in a star shape in the middle of the gallery, which just feels like such a privilege.

Alannah

We didn't get any disturbances. 'Come on! Come and be more antagonistic!'

Raquel

Huge thanks to Alannah Chance and the team at Somerset House who programmed Hyper Functional Ultra Healthy, a series which considered individual and collective health and wellbeing through a programme of newly commissioned artworks, films, workshops, podcasts and conversations. To end here's a bit more info about the exhibition:

'Multidisciplinary artists Christine Sung Kim presents a new series of artworks that explore the physical space of American Sign Language. Each of the four stretched canvases has the shape that describes the movement of the signers arms and hands when making the sign described in the works title. The canvases have been enlarged to imposing sizes, encouraging spatial readings of them in relation to the viewers body and gallery architecture. They have also been left unprimed, appearing empty in terms of painterly content, but providing size and shape parameters in the traditional medium of representation. By taking a minimal approach to the artworks presentation and exhibition, Kim emphasises the specific spatial dimensions of communication.'