



Interview with Liz Clarke

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Interview conducted by Emily Underwood-Lee

Interview edited by Emily Underwood-Lee

Liz Clarke is an artist working in performance, writing and intervention. Her work is mostly Body Based, treading water in the murky boundaries of theatre, cabaret and live art, between reality and dreamscapes; with a healthy dose of artifice and ridiculousness.

'Liz's work evokes a Glitter Ball in a Junk Yard' Ron Athey

Her work often explores representing the myths and archetypes of the 'Female' through alienation, intimacy and the construction of impossible Hyperfemme characters and stories. Themes of identity, conformity, grief, and acceptance on a personal and societal level are recurring fascinations. Her unique blend of socially engaged practice and exploratory devising invites people into her making processes, establishing a bedrock of care and risk-taking to enable people to reclaim space, get their voice heard and create new work. This often involves being outrageous in Libraries!

Liz has worked with organisations large and small as a critical friend, provocateur, live art councillor and access adviser. She has shown work across the UK and has written extensively about her queer maternal practice and socially engaged work for A-N, LADA, Theatre Bristol and Performance Research.

Her latest project *The What If? Hotline* is a performative encounter through a phone line holding space for big and small questions around

loss and the pandemic. She is part of the performance collective Residence and a member of Pervasive Media Studio.

www.lizclarke.org

<https://vimeo.com/lizclarke>

Emily: I wanted to ask you first about the role of care across your practice.

Liz: There are quite a lot of different layers of care entwined within my practice. For most of my time of making work, I've run a participatory practice which has sat alongside but also layered into the performance work. Working with womXn especially, holding space and nurturing the work that they make has always been a really important, organic process.

I only started making live art and performance as my full-time occupation when my son was born. With the birth of my son this became the work that I had to do. In order to fulfil his needs and happiness, I had to ensure that I was fulfilling my own needs and a desk job, I'm sorry, for me, was just not going to happen at that time.

Previously, I worked in mental health services, homelessness, and domestic violence services where I had duty of care for a lot of people. There was a lot of holding going on and I guess here is where my interest in the politics of care, fierce care if you like, stems from. I have a great passion for working with womxn in the arena of performance, which I believe to be really powerful to affect change.

In the last two years, I have worked on *Cannonballista* with various people, including Holly Stoppit, who is the director, and Fran Bossom, who is the producer.¹ When I started working with Holly, we began to untie all the knots and all the difficult bits around my attitude to my practice. That's where the decision came to separate the participatory practice and the theatre making out in *Cannonballista*. In its previous showing a few years before, the show was an opportunity for ten womxn

¹ Cannonballista (2017/2018). See <https://www.lizclarke.org/cannonballista>.

to do a three-day intensive with me and then devise work around the themes. Their stories were interwoven with my story.

Emily: Were they on stage?

Liz: Yes, they were. It did work and it was amazing. It was a really great and transformative experience. It did what it needed to do. The result was good but not sustainable. It was too much for me to hold because I was both performing as well and holding space for the workshop participants, both in the days before the show and also live on stage. Holly coached me through making the decision to separate out the workshop and the performance so that in the final show this story was my story, it could be reclaimed and told.

Working with Holly and Fran, I've been really well cared for and feel really privileged to have had that care, and also pleased I made the decisions to put that care in place, which feels really important. I'm recognising what care I need within my work, which feels like a really powerful place to be. I consider care for the material, and care for my history, and care for my process. I had to fight with the arts council and my producer for the decisions that I made in terms of a budget, but I was very clear that I needed this dedicated time. Fight is the wrong word, but I was very clear that this was what I needed. So that's care in one sense, taking time and care of the process.

In terms of my care for my family, I can talk about *I'm Bitter About Glitter*, which is a show I made with my ten-year-old son. It is this glorious mishmash of the way that we make our work, and the way we live our life as a family.² It was the toughest collaboration that I've ever had, working with my son. I can't help but think about all of the glitter that he poured down my back in through process. All of the boundaries, all of the roles and responsibilities, it just all sat on top of each other in an amazing, really messy, but glorious way. He taught me so much during that process, so much about the power of play and about not knowing and about not holding on to things so tight.

²² *I'm Bitter About Glitter* (2018). See <https://www.lizclarke.org/projects/im-bitter-about-glitter>.



I'm Bitter About Glitter (2018).

Emily: There's a really beautiful moment in *I'm Bitter About Glitter* when you were having the conversation and you looked quite anguished and asked: 'isn't it lonely being one of the glittery children?'. It was a really powerful moment, it so summed up that anxiety of having to be the respectable mother and to contain our children without diminishing them, allowing them to be all that they can be but realising they have to be tamed to fit into the world.

Liz: That was an improvisation that we did and filmed, and then chose to include the film in the performance. I was on the brink of tears because it is... you're dealing with all of that stuff, and your own stuff of ageing and identity and image. There is a lot there.³

³ For a documentary about Liz and Felix's process made by Paul Samuel White see <https://vimeo.com/384995975>.

Emily: Can I take you back to another line, it's from *Cannonballista*, where you said that you 'chose happiness over security'. Can you talk more about that?

Liz: My sister died not that long before I became pregnant with my first child, Felix, so it is all in that mystical cycle of birth and death that I made that decision. Life is short. I thought 'how can I raise a happy child if I'm unfulfilled, and unhappy as a person?' That sounds really simplistic, but I won't apologise for it.

Emily: It does and it doesn't because it is a simplistic concept but it's not entirely simplistic to do.

Liz: No, it isn't. As a parent who is a self-employed artist, it's tricky at times but, practically, it's worked very well with seeing the children, spending time with them, probably more than if I were in a conventional job. But of course, there are sacrifices. I do feel very much that art is another member of our family because it's always present and it pays our bills. It's always a constant. They're very creative children as well but you do wonder about the choices that you make and how that affects them. The piece that I made with my daughter when she was nine months old, *I Tattooed My Baby*, was all about that.⁴

In *Cannonballista*, I use the superhero alter ego, Betty Bruiser, going for those sorts of choices, the hard choices rather than the sensible choices. I had an interesting conversation with Holly early on in our process. She suggested Betty Bruiser was a shaman and I disagreed. Then later, after we'd done all the work, Holly said 'it's not Betty who's a shaman, it's Liz. It's Liz driving it and making these changes and these decisions'. I do feel that that is the right way round and that's one of the reasons why, for me now, that show is over. That's closed. For me, it's done what it needed to do.

Emily: That's really interesting.

⁴ *I Tattooed My Baby* (2013). See <https://www.lizclarke.org/projects/i-tattooed-my-baby>.

Liz: Coming and talking to you today, I was really nervous because I just don't know what I'm doing now with my entire life. That show is closed, that period is closed.

Emily: That was the end of the tour?

Liz: Yes. Well that was the end of the production part. We do have the opportunity now to apply for touring funding. I'm just not there.

Emily: I've stopped performing at the moment. It's two and a half years since my last show, the last thing I made, which was about my experience of breast cancer and sexuality. I don't feel like I can say those words anymore at the moment. I don't know what the words are.

Liz: It does feel a very funny time. I am a bit nervous about even talking to you about it. It's like a new phase.

Emily: What about *I'm Bitter About Glitter*? Is it going anywhere else? Is it going to become anything else?

Liz: Felix wants to do the full-length version, which is apparently about three hours long.

Emily: Has he just plucked that number out of the air?

Liz: Yes. This was just a snippet apparently.

Emily: That would be an act of endurance.

Liz: Yes. Making that show took so much out of me. So what's next for *I'm Bitter About Glitter* is my response to the work. That's the next phase of the project, talking about all of these things, all of the clashes and the roles and the beautiful chaos of it all. I'm imagining it's going to be performance lecture and writing. So we've been invited up to LADA next month to talk about the work so that will be like a little test.⁵

Emily: Performance lecture by you and Felix or by you?

Liz: By both of us. My fierce protection and care of him, just very powerfully and very quickly brought in all of these boundaries that we

⁵ See <https://www.thisisliveart.co.uk/events/kids-families-gender-and-live-art/>.

should all have as artists for ourselves. It was very easy for me to be vocal about these things – to protect him. It was enlightening to me that I could do this for him, but it was more difficult to stick to these ethics (fair pay, boundaries and ownership) for myself!! So I wrote a manifesto - a code of ethics about how we were working and who we will work with and how we expect to be treated. It's been helpful to refer back to.⁶

Emily: How much have you shown *I'm Bitter About Glitter*?

Liz: Just the once but it's been filmed and there's a document of the whole show. I also want to investigate what it looks like to make work with a queer message with children and for children.⁷

Emily: I brought my two kids to see *I'm Bitter About Glitter* and my eldest, was furious with me because she said 'why have you never done this with me?' The care that you might want to impose as a parent is perhaps at odds with the care that the children want from you. Sometimes the children disagree.

Liz: Absolutely. There are so many decisions about representation when working with children. The question about whether they would be happy, when they are adults, to see this version of themselves in that forum where it's a specifically queer audience. It is really complicated. I was always checking, checking all the time, does this feel right? Is this comfortable? Does this adhere to what I've said is my code of ethics to show this amazing individual as he is now in this beautiful part of his life.

Emily: In *Cannonballista* you frame Betty Bruiser as a construct and you counter that with a performance of grief, which, as the performance goes on, you're also framing as a performance of grief. There are moments when Liz and Betty are together on the screen so that any pretence of realness breaks down and it is all hyper-performative. How does this relate to your questions of ethics for yourself?

Liz: We used the drama therapeutic process, so there was a real therapeutic process for me. It shifted my grief personally, but obviously

⁶ See <http://lizclarke.org/blog/no-pantomime-hierarchies-setting-boundaries/>.

⁷ Since the time of this interview a full length version of the show has been produced and toured with an accompanying workshop for families.

you don't put unprocessed trauma on stage. That was a concern because *Cannonballista* could have been really exposing for me but because of the care that is in place in that work, it was safe.

Everything that you saw in that piece was a safe representation of my process so I was never going to unravel in the live event. So yes, the performance of grief was a representation, a kind of looking back. But that's not to say that it wasn't real, especially in the first monologue about my sister. Of course I'm there, of course I'm feeling that but it's a script.

At times I thought the poor old Liz character had got a bit of a bum deal really. I was like 'but that's not me' but we needed the character of Liz to behave in that way for the story arc, which is a different way to how I would have made work in the past. This is the most theatrical piece I've ever done. I've never worked to full-length theatrical format before.



Cannonballista (2017/2018). Image: Verolina Cake.

Emily: It's interesting you refer to her as the Liz character. It felt to me watching, that this is a character but it's interesting to hear you self-consciously describe her as a character. There is no real.

Equally there's loads of real behind all of it but there is no real on the stage. Everything is up for the taking and for interpretation.

Liz: Yes. I would say probably the most real moment was the first one where I was just there greeting the audience. But in some sense it's all real because it's autobiographical but it is also artifice. I love the artifice. It's such a rich seam for me. The phrase in my mind, which I turn to a lot is 'the authenticity of artifice'. I've written quite a bit of performative text around that. I got really, really interested in Dolly Parton and the question of 'how Dolly is Dolly?' How far would you have to cut Dolly Parton through to find something other than Dolly? I read, in an interview with her, because of who she is and her fans, when she goes to a hotel, she sleeps with her wig right next to the bed in case there's a fire alarm and she has to emerge. She would leave a burning building as Dolly Parton. So that runs pretty deep.

Emily: That level of fame and that level of artifice is intertwined so much with myth making. The statement about her wig next to her bed is part of the myth making. There's also the myth that she's heavily tattooed, which I've heard. Or I've heard myths that she's actually really quite butch. But she just encourages that myth making of who is Dolly, doesn't she?

Liz: The authenticity of Betty Bruiser is this carapace - I love that word - and it's constructed and it's built and that's the thing behind the cannon and the shed, she builds it herself. She constructs it herself out of necessity, out of grief, because otherwise she'd just be a molten mess on the floor. It's construct in the very real nature of the word. The artifice, I love it. I think that's really present in all of my work.

Emily: Can I ask about your use of costume? I'm thinking a lot at the moment about what it means to be post-menopausal and to have this body. One of the things I just loved about being in the audience for *Cannonballista* was seeing somebody who has a body that has had children, that's ageing. You highlight your age in relation to Felix in *I'm Bitter About Glitter* too. I don't know how loosely we use ageing, I'm 42.

Liz: Me too.

Emily: So I'm going to use ageing in relation to our changing middle-aged bodies that have had children. These are not the bodies that we are used to seeing on stage. You present yourself so beautifully for us to delight in

as an audience, to delight in what you look like. You invite a joyfulness in what you look like. It is joyful to be shown a glorious, aging and maternal body.

Liz: During the process of making *Cannonballista* I broke my hand. At the beginning of the process I thought 'right, I'm doing this thing, I'm getting my body out on stage at 40 odd. Right, we're going to get really fit. We're going to go to the gym. It's going to be beautiful'. Then I broke my hand and there were complications and I didn't end up doing all of the exercise, which is a massive lesson in acceptance. It was really hard because here I was doing this show. I was having misgivings about the costumes and then I spoke to someone who had seen the last show and they said 'it was just amazing to see you and the way that the costumes got smaller and smaller'. Just as you have also said about the joy of seeing a body on stage. I thought that, for all of us, I've got to do this kind of thing. I've always loved costume and clothes. It was a really vulnerable thing for me to do but again, that's the only thing that I could have done.

Emily: It really surprises me that you say it was vulnerable because the costume is so shiny and so joyful, utterly ridiculous in a wonderful way, it doesn't look vulnerable. You don't look vulnerable or exposed. It's such a mask. It is a small costume but it's a carapace as you said, the glittery blueness of it.

Liz: Yes. That's very much a part of the construct of the character and about its over-the-top femininity. That costume was used in *I Tattooed My Baby*, the leotard with the stars on my breasts. Under the stars were just holes so I could feed the baby on stage, which was brilliant.

Emily: Was she compliant?

Liz: We didn't do it in the end because she didn't need a feed but it was there just in case.

Emily: I love the unruliness of the baby in the performance, she didn't need a feed therefore you could not do that scene.

Liz: You couldn't show the costume off!

Emily: Can I go back to the maternal again? So *Cannonballista* is not a show about you as a mother but I think the maternal is overt in many ways in that performance, if you think of maternal as a care taking. Do you see it as a maternal show?

Liz: No, I don't think I do explicitly, but I brought my maternal self into that show on purpose in order to bring the whole of me and not compartmentalise. You can see the cogs turning in my brain: that making whole of me as a mother, as an artist. But it's so hard. You are so often expected to leave behind that mother part of you, you must amputate it - that's the game, that's the deal, that's the set up. You don't go into a meeting with sick on your shoulder. You don't say I've got to leave for school pick up. I have had amazing colleagues who, when it comes to 2:55pm, just go. I always thought 'wow!'. That was before I had children. But, I brought the whole of me into *Cannonballista*, that's why it's maternal.

Emily: During the show, you're reprimanding Betty and you say 'come on now, I'm a mother'. Does Betty reject that mother part of Liz?

Liz: She just doesn't like the idea of Liz wearing beige and degenerating into sportswear.

Emily: I don't know you that well but that's not what Liz does, is it? There's no beige in sight.

Liz: It's the fear of normalcy. Betty is so extreme and she can't integrate in normal life. I guess that's why the Liz character was trying to kill her off because she needed to find her own way to - I think I said in the piece - 'grow older gracefully and wipe some of this shit [make up] off my face', finding your way, finding your way at this age where I really should put some clothes on. How do you navigate all of that, suddenly making different choices and calming down, that fear of mediocrity in all areas? And then realising you actually do need to not compromise but find a new way and a different way.

Emily: At the end of *I'm Bitter About Glitter* you say you're going to pick up the toys.

Liz: Oh yes, and the homework.

Emily: The tidying up and the going to parents evening.

Liz: Yes, all of that. All of that is still going on, amongst the making process.

Emily: So for Betty, is the maternal about respectability and about greyness and about the mundane? That's clearly not actually how your maternal life is lived.

Liz: No. Well Betty is not a mother. She couldn't think of anything worse. Betty is kind of a warning. Don't throw all of your high heels out!

Emily: Is having a dual status as mother and artist something that you have to struggle with or does that sit easily with you?

Liz: It is a struggle, of course it is because both require 100% and I couldn't do it if I didn't have support. It's that simple. Then of course, we go into the patriarchy. It is a massive struggle and the way that I make work has changed a lot, has gone more cerebral. The ideas are in my head because when you're sat feeding a baby, that's all you can do. All you can do is think. So the way that I've made work has changed. There are also so many restrictions on my time and where I can be, of course. But it has changed the work that I make.

Emily: Leading on from that, you've talked a bit about writing as a practice. Is that part of the change in the way that you make work?

Liz: Yes. I've always written and it's something that I'm doing more and more. I will always do quite a lot of writing quite early on in the process of making work. I'm thinking of doing a lot more and that being the main drive and maybe performing less. I'm not really sure, with the writing, where that's going at the moment but it's just there as something that is really important. I'm not quite sure where that's going to lead.

Emily: You said that the prompt to go full time in your performance making was the children being born. You've made work with your daughter as a baby, you've collaborated with your son as an older child.

And now you are making a move into different forms. How do those transitions relate to the different stages in your mothering?

Liz: There has also been lots and lots and lots of work in between that doesn't involve them directly. I suppose my work has gone from being very much autobiographical to being opened to all of these other people as well which has come out of working with lots of different womxn.

Cannonballista as a full-length theatre show came out of my progression through the work as an artist. *I Tattooed My Baby* was very much a snapshot of that early mothering life - of everything being there on the floor, all of the toys, all of the work stuff, everything, mixed up in dreamscapes and inner dialogue, and with my daughter present because she very much was, at all times. Then making work with Felix in *I'm Bitter About Glitter*, was about inviting another person's perspective into the work, another person who is part of you but also very different. In some ways it is still the idea of the tattooing the child with your stuff. The things you pass on and impose. I'm still very aware of that, but I also want to give space for his own comment and directorship, which made for quite a difficult process because there was a lot of improvisation and no rehearsing, which is a bit like how Betty likes to do things.



I Tattooed My Baby (2013).

Emily: So how much from *I'm Bitter About Glitter* is scripted?

Liz: There were a few markers. Most of the tech cues or the important points would have to be down to me. Everything fixed was in my lines but the rest was not scripted. We knew generally this bit happens there and that bit happens there but it was improvised. He was brilliant. He had a few lines that he really wanted to get in and he did.

Emily: It sounds absolutely terrifying to me to go on stage and be responsible for everything happening in the right order at the right time with this unruly presence that's just going to do what they want.

Liz: But it was not that bad. The product, and maybe my career, is not so important at this point. A small part of the reason why I chose not to, at this time, go down the touring model with *Cannonballista* is it just would not work for me and the family. I don't want to be away from them for any longer than three days. If I do something, it has to be financially worthwhile. I can't make a thing from scratch for a night somewhere random for £100. I need to make the structures work for me, for example with the Arts Council. This is why the work with Fran, the producer, feels really valuable, for us and hopefully for other people. We can begin change structures and organisations to support radical care.

Emily: How does that work with your participatory work?

Liz: This process has allowed us to question our ways of engaging without running all our resources dry and also enabled us to make a statement about the importance of participatory work which should be invested in and nurtured and valued within bigger structures. Social engagement isn't solely one small artist or artist led company's responsibility. The whole fabric is wrong. I've led participatory work for a really long time, and it was doing all that it needed to do. People were getting an amazing experience out of it. They were having little transformations. They were making great work. They were working together. It was great. But at the end of the day, it still wasn't right. It wasn't right for where I am in my practice at the moment. I needed to care for the work, for the participants and for myself. We started to engage with people in a different way during the making of *Cannonballista*. It really felt like we

were tapping into what was needed at that particular moment, but there's nothing to support that. So, what is the future for this and how does a small company like us fit into that? What can we do? How can we really make sure that we are caring for all that we do? How can we enable artists, mothers to keep going, to keep making maternal work?