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## Care and reciprocity: a conversation between Rhiannon Armstrong and Mel Evans

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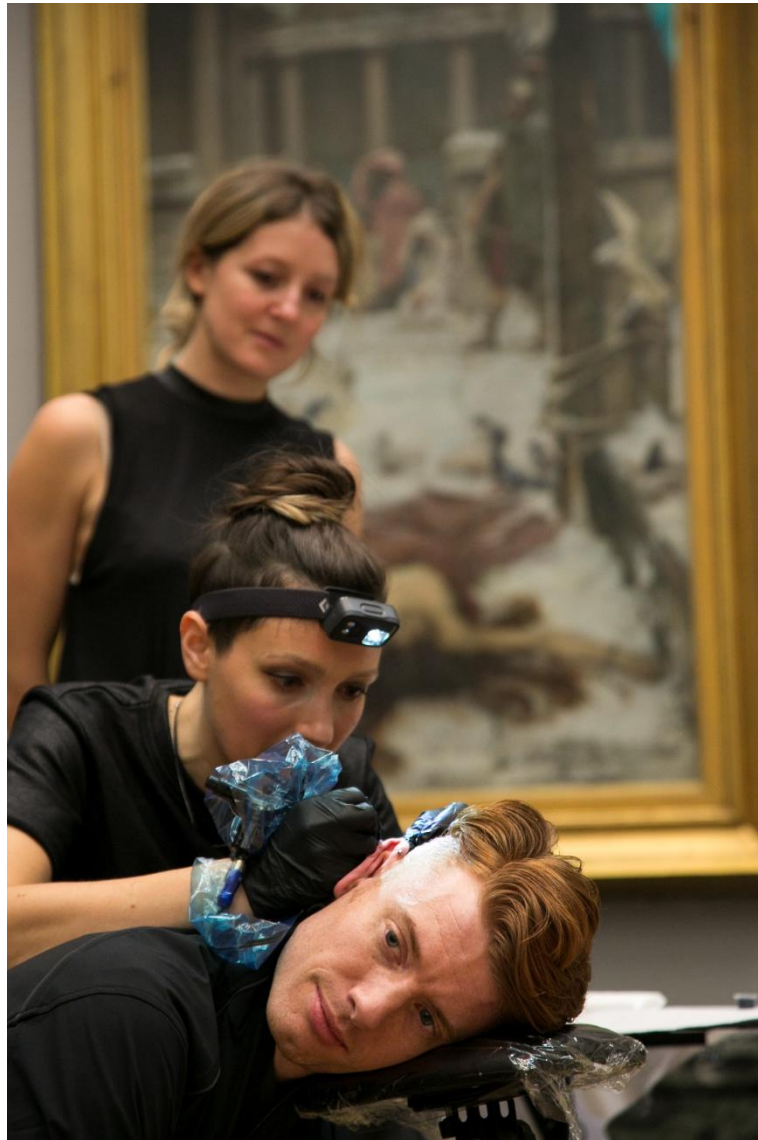
There are two versions of this piece:

- the interactive online version, where we maintained the meandering texture of our live conversation<sup>1</sup>
- the written version, where we streamlined the content to focus on the core ideas

Mel Evans and Rhiannon Armstrong met for the first time at *The Art of Care-full Practice* symposium. They share a belief in the importance of acknowledging the fluidity of roles of giving and receiving in participatory performance practice. Through their encounters with participants and public in *Birthmark* and *Can I Help You?*, Mel and Rhiannon reflect on the complex and profound relationships of trust at work in these performances, and attempt to be open about vulnerable questions of personal agency and what we get out of the work as artists and activists. They do this with the intention that acknowledging the fluidity between when we are giving and when we are receiving will lead to a better, more sustainable practice.

*Birthmark* is a performance intervention work by Liberate Tate, an art collective of which Mel is part. Founded in 2010, Liberate Tate takes action, and its performance

interventions have involved hundreds of people. After six years making unsanctioned live art interventions in Tate galleries, Liberate Tate succeeded in ending BP sponsorship of Tate. In *Birthmark*, performers receive a permanent tattoo of the parts per million of carbon dioxide in the Earth's atmosphere in the year of their birth. As of 2017, around 150 people have birthmarks: some of them from Liberate Tate tattoo-givers as part of interventions inside Tate (December 2015) and the National Portrait Gallery (June 2016), or by commission at galleries and events.



Birthmark

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Rhiannon's performance *Can I Help You?* toured to eight UK towns as part of Battersea Arts Centre's Collaborative Touring Network in autumn 2016. In it, Rhiannon offers free help to strangers by basing herself on the local high street wearing a T-shirt saying 'FREE HELP!' and a tool belt equipped with items such as an umbrella, the Little Book of Calm, MP3 player, bin bag, change for a tenner, etc. The resulting interactions and encounters form the work.



*Can I Help You? at Heads Up Hull, Autumn 2016*  
Photo courtesy of Jerome Whittingham @photomoments

Rhiannon and Mel continued their discussions for this special issue of the journal in the form of a writing exchange, and a (transcribed) meeting over lunch in Manze's pie and mash shop on Walthamstow High Street, London. By exchanging stories, the two seek to form a common understanding around ideas of care, giving, receiving and holding space for others to give and receive.

### **The questions**

The questions Mel and Rhiannon reflected on, in writing and in person, were:

- What does care mean to you in your work?
- What does vulnerability mean in your work?
- How do you understand personal agency and the exchange of care?
- How do we receive care as we give it, and vice versa, and allow the work to sustain ourselves as artists and activists?

### **What does care mean to you in your work?**

Mel writes: For me, it means taking care of each other in a collective throughout the creative process. As Liberate Tate explores different ideas for performances, the collaborative process is—almost necessarily—fraught with disagreement and competing theories, both strategic and aesthetic. We always make each other laugh: this is caring. It softens the debate and loosens our collective grip on the shape of the thing, allowing the artwork to take its own form between us and our respective thoughts and ideas.



Later, care takes on a different centrality to the work. Care means involving other artists, activists and performers in the piece: requiring questions around how to make it enriching and empowering; how to sneak adequate amounts of food and water into the gallery for people to last the duration of the performance; leaving enough space in the performance design for the creative licence of performers; and considering which decisions will need to be made by consensus on the day, for example when the intervention ends. Interventionist practice necessitates care for agency as well as for physical and emotional needs. Oh, and legal *care*—should it be necessary—is always ready and waiting! Tate has called the police multiple times during Liberate Tate’s performance interventions, and although no performers were ever arrested, we needed to take care around that possible eventuality.

Rhiannon writes: I like how you begin your thoughts on care with a description of conflict and the collaborative process. Also, when you describe the physical and legal needs side of care with Liberate Tate—the basics—it makes me think of the phrase ‘I’ll take care of it’. When you are going through something major (an operation, a bereavement perhaps) you might need people to *just take care* of certain basic things for you, like food or cleaning, so that you can focus on recovery. Have the basics covered, so that you can focus on the important stuff.

There is another intention that can exist in the phrase *take care of it*: when a security guard is told to *take care* of a group of street drinkers, they are supposed to move them on. So, in some instances, *take care* can mean *get rid*.

Something basic with *Can I Help You?* is that there are no collaborators to negotiate with ahead of time. My preparation involves spending a whole day in the town centre I’ll be working in, looking and listening, getting to

know whose space it is. The premise of the work is that I am standing around offering free help of any kind, to anyone. It is a way to meet, to begin a conversation.

I scope out the location the day before, sit and observe the environment and its inhabitants, speak to anyone whose territory I might be entering into (Big Issue sellers, people who are street homeless, café and market stall owners). I consider it part of my job to explain my presence and interruption here.

When I think about care and what it is in this work, in one way I am thinking about taking care over how we bring about a meeting between strangers:

~~*To care for*~~

~~*To take care of*~~

*To take care with how we meet one another.*

*To take care over being together.*

*To care about what people are saying.*

*To listen.*

Mel writes: It's interesting to me that practising observation within the site of the performance is so important to both of us. This suggests observation is a core part of the care taken—to understand the movements and flows of people in a space, and therefore how to act or intervene in that space care-fully; to think critically about the social politics of the

site in order that our entries into it are able to be transgressive and progressive; and like you say, to listen and to observe is to be respectful.

### **What does vulnerability mean in your work?**

Mel writes: Vulnerability goes to the core of what Liberate Tate does. By blending forms of live art and direct action, our vulnerable bodies become the site of the performance. In direct action, people put their bodies in the way of the harmful activity they are trying to halt. In live art, performers explore the world and ideas from the site of their individual bodies, experiences and identities. In *Birthmark*, the centre point of the performance is the tattoo-needle inking our skin. This is a bearably painful act, and the tattoo-receiver is vulnerable to this sharp object held—extremely carefully—by the tattoo-giver. I was one of four women in our collective who learned to give tattoos to make this performance ritual possible. When giving tattoos, I ask people why this piece spoke to them, why they wanted to be a part of the performance, what moments or choices in their life making this mark speaks to or emerges from. So, the act itself, and the conversation held between us during it, were similarly intimate.

Rhiannon writes: What does vulnerability mean? I am thinking of how people seem to be ready to go to a difficult place with me as we converse on the street in *Can I Help You?* I am thinking of how often I have ended up hearing from people for a long while about really personal things, listened to stories about difficult childhoods, abusive relationships, money problems, the death of a son and the missed grandchildren who now live a long way away with their mother. I have ended up crouched at a café table holding a woman's hand as she wept over her loss, walking a man to a drop-in centre for alcohol recovery. I wrote this note to myself following an interaction with a couple in Rochester:



*'Thanks so much, this is the least I can do':* Steve giving me a piece of fudge, who spent a lot of time talking to me with his wife about life making you emotionally hardened and wanting to be more open.

The thing about seeing that note now is I am reminded that this effort to stay open and receptive, to keep soft and connected, is something I know intimately. I know that hardening, and I am reminded that this difficulty is not unique to me or even to those I am close to. Complete strangers in the street told me so!

I think it can sometimes be more possible to be yourself with a stranger. Is this because there is less weight of expectation or emotional investment in who we are to one another? I put a lot of commitment into trying to be clearly and most openly myself when I do this work, and I find myself having a kind of tantrum ahead of each start time. It's like some kind of real life version of stage fright, life fright if you will. As if someone else is making me do this and it isn't a situation I am exclusively responsible for bringing about!

There is a pay-off though. People are more direct with me in this performance than I've ever experienced in my life and I find that refreshing and inspiring: it is something I try to take into the rest of my dealings with the world.

Mel writes: That definitely resonates. I've had conversations with people through this piece, people that I've known for years and people that I've only just met, that I can't imagine us having any other way, than with our bodies so intimately connected physically as I tattoo them. During the tattooing, we're both focused on the ink and the conversation, cocooned in our tight combined aura, blocking out all distractions. Each *Birthmark* session has held dozens of

beautiful moments when people have shared defining experiences and histories. Each of us who give the tattoos has described feeling like a library of stories and personal journeys around art, activism, and climate change.

Mel and Rhiannon pick up the conversation in person in the pie and mash shop.

Rhiannon says: Has there ever been a thing with the tattoos where you've thought *I'm not sure this is what you need?* Have you ever thought *I don't think you should be doing this?* Is there such a thing as the wrong reason? Would you say anything if you thought there was?

Mel says: With this piece we're hyper-cautious about readiness and consent as part of the caring process. That's primarily part of the learned culture of tattooing that we've embraced by immersing ourselves in sub-cultural tattooing spheres as far as possible. Sometimes it's really obvious—we wouldn't give a tattoo to someone who had been drinking alcohol or taking anything stronger, just like a tattoo studio wouldn't. We also look out for the time people are willing to allow themselves for the ritual / performance. If someone's in a rush or wants a clear deadline on when we'll be finished, we take that as an indication that the moment isn't right for them to do this, and that we can be more attentive with them if there's no imminent deadline to work towards.

Rhiannon says: So, no one walks up and says *I've been inspired by your piece and I want to get a tattoo?*

Mel says: If they do, we say: *Let's be in touch about a future date.* Overall, there were as many people who reached out to us about the project as we directly invited. There was always space for people to share among each other why they're

doing it, by speaking in small groups or speaking in a large group saying *This is why I'm doing it* or *This is what it connects with for me*. *Birthmark* always takes place within a group, and that's part of the community-building aspect to the work. In all these ways it was clear there was a lot of thoughtfulness from everyone involved around questions of *Why this, why now, what meaning does it carry for you?*

Rhiannon says: It sounds like it is also about being listened to, being heard. Because I imagine it would be easy to feel like you're part of a giant thing where you're serving something else, and your own story is being lost.

Mel says: In a way that tension is what we're exploring, because there are these numbers that mean so much for our lives and yet are so alien or soulless. Carbon emissions feel like abstract data to most people, but that have these very visceral implications. So, we ask how can we find a way into those numbers that makes them more personal? It makes a community out of the coldness of the numbers, and offers this sense that the levels could return to something safer. It takes them from being these abstractions and makes them into something more personal.

With the interactions that you were having with people in *Can I Help You?*, how did you negotiate that sense of beginning and end, and the expectations of the relationship? Did you stop and say, *Bye, I'm off duty now?*

Rhiannon says: Once we're past the assumptions where people think I'm selling something, when they know that my proposition is this weird thing that I am just a normal human being and I'm offering free help in whatever way one human can offer another, the thing that characterises people's reactions is their concern with taking up too much of my time.

You might assume that if you stand around on the street offering up attention someone would be bound to come up and want it all, but that just doesn't happen. So much of it is actually about reassuring people.

For many people, after 30 seconds they think that they should leave me alone. A lot of the work I am doing is really about prolonging it to get past the three-minute mark, where then it can become half an hour and something really great can happen. So, most of that stuff that you might think would be about saying *I'm off now* is actually more about saying:

*I'm still here,*

*I'm still here,*

*I'm still here.*

and finding another mode to be together.

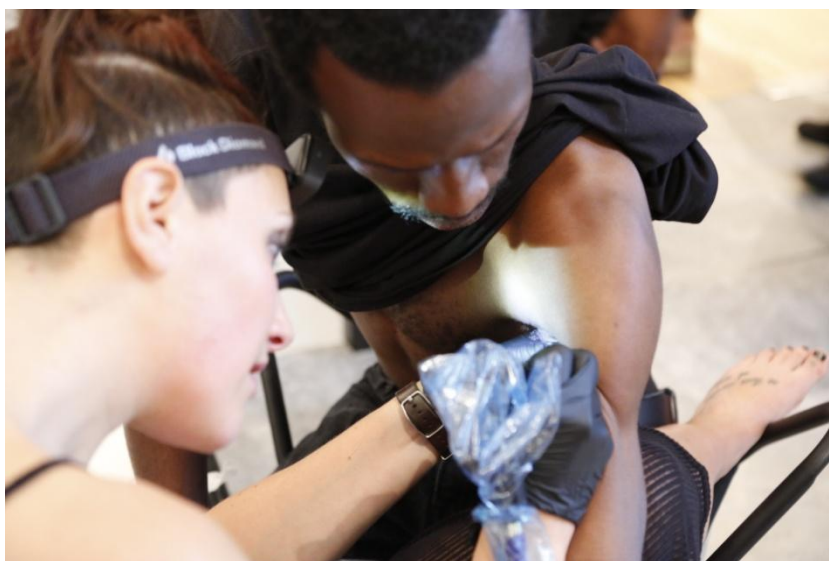
### **How do you understand personal agency and the exchange of care?**

Mel writes: When centring on vulnerability in the work, it's of course vital to consider agency and consent. It's about allowing vulnerability to be a source of strength and power. In *Birthmark*, this came down to the relationship between the tattoo-giver and tattoo-receiver, one based on mutual trust, understanding, and shared community.

Mel and Rhiannon pick up the conversation in person in the pie and mash shop.

Rhiannon says: I wanted to ask you about conversation and intimacy in *Birthmark*: about physical contact, and about conversations that happen when something else is happening with your hands. I'm thinking about it because I've been hosting a craft table every week at a migrant support centre where people come for emergency assistance. It's there as a place you can be while you wait to be seen, which can be a very tense time. It facilitates conversation and companionship, talking about really difficult stuff to people you don't know in a language you maybe don't know very well, but meanwhile there are things being made and we've all got our eyes focussed on those. We had the idea that that might be easier somehow.

Mel says: Definitely both physical contact and a focussed task was a way in which the rhythm of the conversation in *Birthmark* got set up. Because we're giving these tattoos in a range of different spaces, having carried all the kit we need to do a tattoo, but without all the apparatus found in a tattoo studio like a bed where you can position your body exactly for the right angle. It's important for the person who's having the tattoo to be relaxed and their muscles loose, so that you can stretch the skin in all the right ways.



Birthmark

Photo: all rights reserved, copyright Martin LeSanto-Smith

You get into some intimate positions, and by doing that you've already stripped away a lot of the *what might we talk about?* Also, you don't have any awkward or somehow audience-like *I'm staring into your eyes as I'm listening to you talk*, and that can free up the conversation to happen more loosely. Also, there's a bit more space for quiet performance than a private one-to-one conversation would bring, both because of others in the space, and because the person receiving the tattoo really has the stage, the tattoo givers act more as prompt. We're not going to be looking at the person speaking except for the occasional checking glance, and when we're talking to them there'll be lots of pauses while we focus on something fiddly. There might be more questions to the person getting the tattoo or there might be moments where you say *I'm just going to pause now*, because you're focussed on giving them the tattoo and you're listening. Also, talking is a helpful way of staying calm while you're receiving a tattoo. I don't know if you've ever had a tattoo; it's not extreme pain but it is sore, there's a recognised painfulness to it, and talking through it is an established convention!

Rhiannon says: I think in the beginning, the relationship between the audience and I for *Can I Help You?* is one of distrust. There is always suspicion and disbelief: the suspicion that I want something from them (money or a signature) and disbelief that I won't ask for or accept payment, that I am really here for anyone, for any length of time, and will go anywhere.

There was a conversation with one woman that I really loved. It was quite sunny and actually quite hot, and I had sun-cream on me, and a fan and plant-mister, and I was offering people sun-cream and *free breeze*. And this woman was like, *What's this then, are you doing samples for beauty products?* and when I said that I was offering free help to people for a few hours, she kept asking *What's the catch?* So



I told her it was part of an arts festival and said *I guess the catch is that it's art* and she said, *Oh all right—in that case go on then!* I really liked her reaction and afterwards, I started using that as a way to speak to people: *The catch is, it's art.*

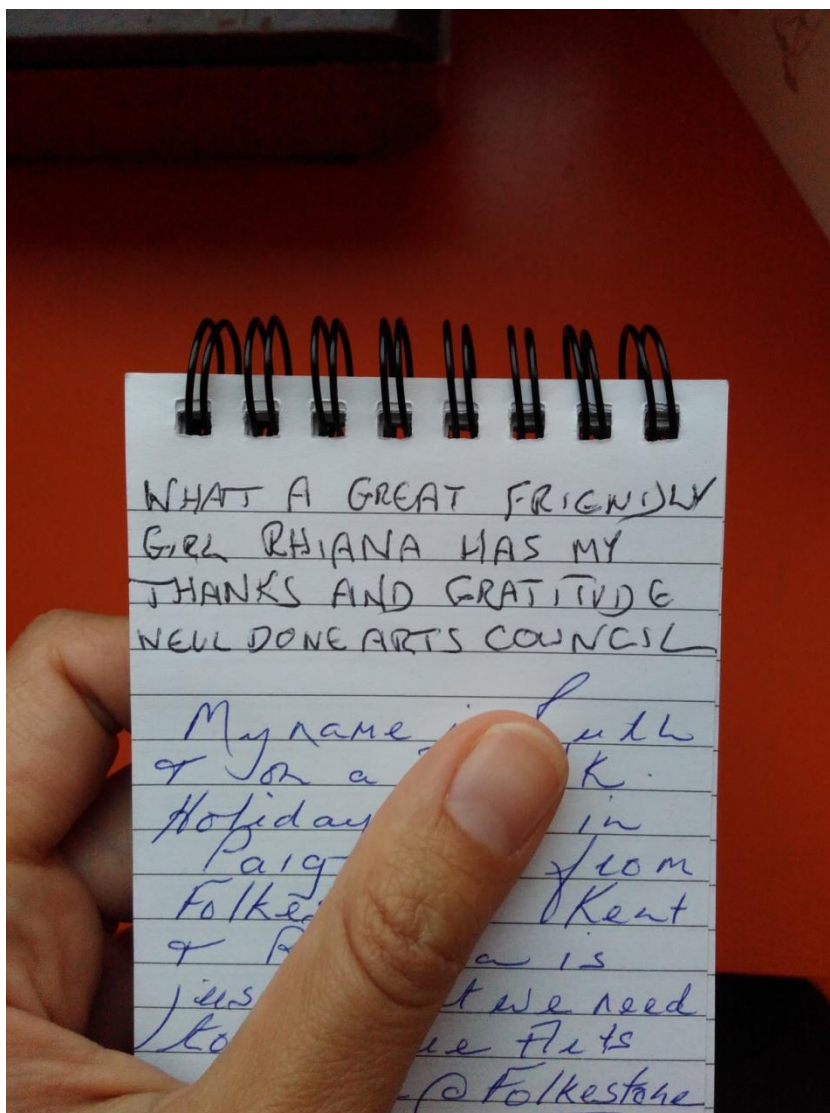
What I really reject in how I am often required to talk about participatory performance is the idea that what you will get out of your engagement with a work is predefined, that your relationship to it is going to be of a certain type or quality. With *Can I Help You?*, the thing that I feel so energised by when I do it is that people make their own relationship to it. The opener is this helping thing, but then what people get from it, how it transpires, what happens, is up to us to determine together.

Mel says: There's something about the way that in *Can I Help You?* there's an openness of the amount of time you spend with people. It's not fixed which allows people to find their own ways to shape it and give it closure.

Rhiannon says: There was this guy in Paignton, Devon. When I met him, he was carrying some wood in a trolley, and he had this little dog that was also with him. I offered to carry the wood, which he wouldn't let me do, but he said *you can hold my dog while we walk*. He was one of the people that after 30 seconds say *OK, thank you, I mustn't use any more of your time*, but he also said repeatedly how much he valued being listened to, so I just kept reassuring him saying *I can carry on walking with you, I have nowhere else to be* and we ended up walking back to where he lived.

He was talking about his flat and the kennel he wanted the wood for, and he ended up telling me about his childhood and his life. He'd had a tough time of it and when he became ill and couldn't work and was homeless, the council had given him this flat, but it was unfurnished. He took the wood

up to the flat and I waited outside with the dog, Cranky. When he came out he was carrying a little wooden doorstep and he was like *you must take this doorstep*. It was hand-painted, it looked like Robin Hood to me. And then he started asking who my boss was, he wanted to know who he could report to—he had been quite moved a number of times about being listened to—and so I said *I guess there's the Arts Council, they're not my boss but you can write to them if you like*. And he wrote this:



Can I Help You?

Courtesy of Rhiannon Armstrong



Can I Help You?

*Courtesy of Rhiannon Armstrong*





Can I Help You?

Courtesy of Rhiannon Armstrong

**How do we receive care as we give it, and vice versa, and allow the work to sustain ourselves as artists and activists?**

Mel writes: In *Birthmark*, the idea of exchange was central: as tattoo-givers we were holding the needles, but together with the whole group we all held the space of the performance. Keeping a site of intervention calm and quiet was part of the performance design in order to create the right conditions for people's tattoos and the dialogue that was central to the process. Thinking about the work more

broadly, there are various spheres of care at play: caring for each other in the collective, caring for performers and activists who join to take part in interventions, and caring for the public space of the gallery, protecting it from the insidious presence of oil company BP (the campaign to end BP sponsorship centred around the critique that Tate's implicit support of the company's harmful activities was at odds with Tate's values).

In all these modes, the work of care is fundamental to sustaining spaces of creativity and resistance, which in turn sustain each of us involved. So, it's not about *giving* or *sacrifice* or any of these notions that sometimes people relate to activism: it's about creating ethical spaces and practices that sustain and empower those involved, which is a very different power dynamic, a much healthier one, I would say.

Mel and Rhiannon pick up the conversation in person in the pie and mash shop:

Rhiannon says: Thinking about what you described as the ethical and sustaining spaces of *Birthmark*, I am reminded of a conversation I had with Adrian Howells backstage at a festival of one-to-one performance in London in 2010.

We were bemoaning the lack of care over audience members who were opening themselves up in challenging works. He was doing *The Pleasure of Being: washing, feeding, holding*, and I was doing a piece I made for Coney called *The Loveliness Principle*. We were united in our suspicion and irritation with the festival which was marketed with a message like *do you dare to get intimate*; it seemed to have an attitude approaching titillation and didn't have much in place to support audiences who might be deeply affected.

We talked about a duty of care to the audience: that if you are getting people to do something challenging then you need to have thought about what support might be needed. On the one hand we were just bitching about the festival in the green room, but on the other it gave me the assurance to stand up for the experience I want to create for an audience, which I have done rigorously ever since.

The whole conversation was about the audience not being cared for by the holding pattern of this festival, but we were in the green room and I wonder if we were also talking about ourselves as artists.

Mel says: You were looking after each other perhaps?

Rhiannon says: I think so. Because doing these intense things with audiences is amazing and also very draining. So, when we felt like the context of the festival wasn't caring for those audiences enough after they left us, we took on that responsibility. You can take on all those layers of responsibility, but then you find yourself left alone at the end. I think it helped to talk about it: we were shoring each other up.

Mel says: Then I guess the difference, in some of the experiences you're talking about, and in *Birthmark*, is finding ways to build community through these interactions and through these moments. So how do these intimate moments lead to something beyond the one-to-one relationship?

If I try to remember specific conversations, I think of those ones where I was having a conversation with someone about why they'd chosen to have this tattoo, what it meant to them, what points in their life were steering them towards this



moment. With one person we found similar experiences really shaped us, we were like, *No way, you were at the G8 protests in Stirling in 2005—I was there too, we were there together, we weren't friends then, oh, and then you did this action, yeah we would have both been there on the same day* and then you end up building up ten or fifteen year parallel histories and being like *Oh, we've always been part of this broader community* and having this moment of intimacy to tighten it and almost commemorate or celebrate it in some way.

Having community-building as a really asserted part of the work helped avoid that thing in the arts where there can be a slant towards ticketed, compacted, consumable experience. And yet, so much of the arts is about that community, is about how—especially in terms of your relationship with Adrian and so many people's—is that actually the arts are sustained by communities. *The Art of Care-full Practice* symposium where we met was just one of those moments: a community event, a space to recognise, celebrate and exist as a community.

## Notes

1. The interactive online version of the conversations can be seen at <https://s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/twinery/RA+proof+3+A+conversation+about+care+and+reciprocity+between+Rhiannon+Armstrong+and+Mel+Evans.html>.

## About the authors

RHIANNON ARMSTRONG makes works under the lifelong series title *Instructions for Empathetic Living*. She puts empathy, dialogue and interaction at the core of her practice, and brings the audience-focus of a theatre background to interdisciplinary work that has included intimate performances, interactive digital works, textile, music, and collaborative theatre projects. She is perhaps best known for her performance and web project *The International Archive of Things Left Unsaid*, and *Public Selfcare System*.

MEL EVANS is an artist and campaigner who is part of Liberate Tate. Her book *Artwash: Big Oil and the Arts* was published by Pluto

Press in 2015. Mel is interested in blending art and activism to create new political possibilities.