

[ Background Conversations ]

^M00:00:08

>> Yeah, I'm going to talk about my work, but first I'd like to do an exercise that I usually do when I get to know new groups of people, just to see -- get a sense of who's in the room, what your voices all sound like. So, if everybody -- if I could invite you all to close your eyes. I'm closing my eyes, too. I promise. And so, what I'm going to do is I'm going to say my name, and then I want someone else from the crowd to say their name, and then someone else say their name, until everybody said their name once. And we're going to keep our eyes shut until everybody in the room said their name. And I'm going to start off the chain reaction. I'm just going to take a second to breathe, to get comfortable in the non-visual space. Carmen.

^M00:01:00

[ Inaudible Comments ]

^M00:01:04

>> Martha.

>> Alicia.

>> Helen.

>> Margie.

^M00:01:09

[ Inaudible Comments ]

^M00:01:13

>> Nadia.

>> Max.

^M00:01:15

[ Inaudible Comments ]

^M00:01:19

>> Shannon.

>> Julia.

^M00:01:20

[ Silence ]

^M00:01:25

>> Taneisha.

>> Vanessa.

-- all assumed spellings.

>> Is that everybody? You can open your eyes. There's always someone that waits until the end. I'm glad that I got you two last ones, before I told everyone to open their eyes. Okay. So, I started like doing creative work maybe in 2007, but I didn't think of myself as an artist at that time. I was a writer, and I just was trying to think through this idea of what it means to be someone who is disabled. And I was doing these experiments to help me better understand my own position within my community and how like adopting a white mobility cane sort of changed my position and my relationship with others. So, you know, initially I was using a typical like white and red cane. I really felt like this -- like as a symbol, it classified, and it put me into a separate category than my like friends and, you know, my peers. So, I was always felt like it really didn't identify me in the way that I wanted to be identified. So, one of the first things that I

did was peel all the red and white tape off my cane, and it was just this black graphite underneath, and I replaced the handle with this wooden handle. And I thought of this as sort of a way to like turn down this -- the volume on the signal that the cane usually is transmitting, which is this person needs help. And yeah, I -- you know, sometimes they do need help, but I'd kind of rather just like ask people when I need help, instead of, you know, having people just kind of grab me and try to help me across the street when I'm, you know, these interactions are often like too quick for me to even know what to say, and I just wanted a way to like disrupt that a bit. So, this really helped, with the black cane. And one of the first experiments that I did was that I made a 15-foot cane, and I brought it here. So, yeah, so I would go on walks with this. My first walk was in -- on Commercial Drive in Vancouver, on like -- during rush hour. And so, I would like, you know, I took up the entire sidewalk when I was using this thing. People had to like jump out of my way. And really, I became an obstacle for other people to have to negotiate. So, and I really think that, you know, usually when I'm using a cane, there's like this forcefield around me. People kind of stay away, but they always are attracted to me, like it's a magnet, almost, for unwanted support. But with this cane, I really felt like it just exaggerated that whole dynamic of like distancing that I felt with the cane.

^M00:04:38

^M00:04:45

And it was, I mean, it was more of an antagonistic project. Like I don't -- yeah, it was coming at a time where I was feeling frustrated, because I was learning -- my walking route's in Vancouver, where I grew up. But I had to like relearn all these walking routes, how to navigate them with a cane. And I kept bumping into things and obstacles, and it really felt like the city wasn't build with my access in mind. So, I don't know, with this -- I just kind of wanted to claim some space and just like, yeah, really become an obstacle and have others have to negotiate for their own movement.

This is a project from 2013, a performance where I replaced my cane with a marching band. I -- yeah, so I -- it really started as a joke conversation with my best friend in Portland, where we were just kind of discussing like the various things I could replace my cane with, and landed on this idea of replacing it with a marching band. And like I really love this idea, so I kept telling people about it. And but a month later, I was telling this curator and, you know, a week after that conversation, he said, oh, you know, by the way, I have five marching bands who are interested in working with you, and they were all high school marching bands from Santa Ana, California. I ended up working with this band, the Great Centurion Marching band, from Century High School. And it took about six months for us to develop sort of this performance, and we would meet on Skype, and they would interview me about the kinds of things that I might encounter on a walk, the kind of obstacles that I might bump into, and then they went off and developed musical cues to indicate various things. And like right before the performance, we did like this really quick rehearsal

in the high school parking lot, and we just played out various scenarios, like pretend I'm stepping from the sidewalk onto a busy street. What happens? And like the Marching Band Director would direct band members to different things, like obstacles. And yeah, we kind of just improvised, and downtown Santa Ana, where we were exploring, was really unfamiliar to me before this performance. And throughout the performance, we just kind of like became this responsive kind of like support network. And were moving pretty intuitively. Yeah, I found my way into like an underground parking structure, to like a cafe, art gallery, and people would also just like be really happy that there was like a marching band, so they just joined the crowd and walked with us. This is from a performance from that same project. It's called Mobility Device. And it says from September in New York City on the high line. So, with this iteration, I was working with the Hungry March Band. They're, you know, the high school band was playing like football, like hype music, so -- and that's what their repertoire consisted of -- and, you know, I'll just give you an example. It was like da-da-da-da da-da-da-da-da da-da-da-da-da da-da-da-da-da da-da-da-da-da. And that was kind of the song they played for like our whole hour-long performance. And it would slow down and speed up, based on like how fast I was walking. You know, it was fun to play around with, as well. But for this performance in New York, this band's been together for over 13 years. They actually started as a band playing the Mermaid Parade at Coney Island. And they have their own repertoire. There's no band director, but they advertise themselves as a band that plays any gig. So, I kind of challenged them on that and said, "Hey, how about this?" And they were up for it. So, we were rehearsing in this space in Williamsburg from last October. And again, just going through various scenarios I get myself into when I'm walking, and then they develop these kind of strategies for addressing those things. So, what the band does when I'm encountering a staircase that leads upstairs or down and various obstacles. And the -- since there was no band leader, every band member in the band had practice being at every position in our formation, so they could each respond to whatever we encountered. Yeah, so this is from 2015. It's a performance where I replace my cane with a megaphone. And instead of letting the cane like speak for me, I speak for myself -- use the words that I use -- to describe myself. And really put that call to support out to the the people around me. So, this first performance was just for myself. It was an improvised process, just with a small camera crew. And, you know, I don't use words like blind or visually impaired to describe myself because, you know, I think those terms still privilege visual experience, and at a point in time, I made this choice to shift the value from the visual to the non-visual, to really, you know, kind of explore what I could discover through my non-visual senses. And now, you know, I think of myself as a non-visual artist, someone who uses their non-visual senses as a way of navigating their surroundings. So, in this performance, I was just saying like, "I can't see you. I hope you can see me. I hope I don't bump into you." I would find myself at the corner of a -- or at a crosswalk, just asking, you know, someone there

that can help me cross the street, and I'd have to wait there for quite a long time, until someone showed up. People have actually like been parked at a crosswalk and then like got out of their car to cross me across the street before during this performance, which I think it's interesting, how it like just -- I mean, other people have yelled at me as well, because they just don't know what's going on. So, yeah. And I really thought of this as like a way to reclaim that social function of the cane. So again, use my own language to [inaudible].

This is a project that I did with this engineering college just outside of Boston. And the whole idea around this was to like redesign like the cane. So, like -- and the designer that invited me to do this project really embraces the -- this concept of design for one. So, instead of making the next like, you know, iPhone or consumer object that, you know, everyone can use, they interview someone and make one object for one person. So, you know, what one's hopes for usability are or like what they want in the device that they're developing. And so that's a process we went through. So, students interviewed me about like my thoughts about the cane and how I felt it classified me and distanced me from others. And we just like played with this idea of alternative canes. And what you're looking at is a studio sort of where groups of students are like making basic prototypes around this idea. And one of the groups was just working with what they had in their dorm room, and they had a bunch of like guitar equipment and like effects pedals and like delay and looping pedals and amps. And so, what they did was like put a contact mic at the tip of my cane, and then just tapped a cord to it. And then output it to an amp, and so I would be able to translate texture into sound as I scraped or tapped my cane. And then, I could play with that sound with the pedals, like with the effects and delay and looping pedals. The students made like 300 cane ideas. They developed this list of 300 possible cane ideas, from like a cane that had -- like would leave a trail of ink when you're using it, to a cane that was just like an extension of my vest, basically, that was like these like cat whiskers that would like touch things, and I would get feedback based on what I was encountering. Yeah, all sorts of designs. But only a few of those were developed into basic prototypes. And one of them that I'm going to show a short video of is called the Wander Cane, and it would take the user where it wanted to go, rather than letting the user, you know, have the agency where they wanted to go.

^M00:14:03

[ Video playing ]

^M00:14:20

These are the kinds of videos that got like every month or so just about done playing in studio around these different concepts.

^M00:14:28

[ Video Playing ]

^M00:14:43

That was short-lived. And this is one of the students working on the modulation device that produces the sound that was made with the

pedals, the Fender guitar pedals.

^M00:14:54

[ Video Playing ]

^M00:14:59

And so he's working on like the delay or working on the effectiveness of the contact mic in the delay. And so this student like actually built this like three -- a reverse 3D printed, housing for the contact mic, so it could sit like comfortably inside of the tip of the cane. So, they just -- yeah. Just playing. Oh yeah, you can go to the next one. This is just when it was fully developed, another student using the cane.

^M00:15:33

[ Video Playing ]

^M00:15:42

And this is what the object looks like now. It's supposed to be portable, but it's kind of heavy, and I can like put it on my belt, but yeah, it's -- the idea is that like I will redevelop this design, and then it will be more portable, and I can just like throw it into my suitcase. And I tried to send this -- well, I sent it to Australia for a show, and some of the internal components came loose, so I need a more robust model, I guess. And the idea is I'd be able to connect to any sound set-up, so I could like work with a composer or a musician, who could like mix the sounds that I'm making live. This is an image from a walking tour that I've been doing, since 2010. It is a non-visual walk, where people line up behind me, link arms, and shut their eyes. And I take them on like about an hour-long walk or longer, sometimes. I don't think of this walk as like a walk in my shoes or like a simulation of my experience, because there's like a lot that I can't share with people in that way. I really think of this more as like time in which we're -- intentional time spent with your eyes closed, time where you're exercising your non-visual senses. We don't usually get to exercise our non-visual senses in our daily routine, so this is just like time in which we get to do that together. The walk that you're looking at now is at Haverford College in Pennsylvania. And usually, what I'll do is, I'll map a route and walk it multiple times, until I feel comfortable bringing like a group of people with me. But for this walk, it's relatively easy landscape, so I just chose the destination for where I wanted the walk to end, which was like the campus track and field track. And I just problem-solved my way there, with the group of people who came for the walk. And if you knew where you were going, and you started from our starting point, you might get there in five minutes, but for this, we took an hour and 45 minutes. And that's part of the project -- the performance as well. This is a group at the California College of the Arts in San Francisco in 2012. This is a walk I did a couple of years ago in New York City. This is the same group, at the California College of the Arts, and this is the first time like a large group of people came to one of my walks, and this is about 50 people. Since then, I've led walks for up to 90 people, and we really like kind of like disrupt public space, when we're that large of a group. So, like

people are waiting for us to cross the street. Sometimes, people honk at us. We -- yeah, and I really think, too, when -- I mean, even if it's like a modest group of people, like it really is about a group of people coming together and just kind of finding a way to support each other in this sort of activity. I'm delivering like information from the front of the line, like about obstacles and different things. And then every second person is repeating those directions or those -- that information, sort of like a game of Telephone that abstracts by the time it gets to the end of the line. And also, people are just like letting others know about what's relevant to them. Like say they encountered a step, and they're like, oh yeah, I just walked up that step. Just be careful. And sometimes, the chain breaks, and I tell everyone to keep their eyes shut, and I separate myself from the front, and then reconnect the chain.

This is a project that I did in 2013 at the Guggenheim. I proposed this project, called the Touchy Subject, which was about touching artwork in the museum. And so, as part of the process, I negotiated for the ability to touch objects from the collection. And then I worked with staff members in this training program, where we spent times with our eyes shut, touching these objects. And then, you know, kind of discovering what we could find out about these objects, like different kinds of knowledge about these things, that we could know with eyes closed. And we developed this methodology for touching that kind of like, you know, made it a practice. And the next day, we offered tours where anybody who was interested could go on a tour, where they would link arms -- it was very similar to today, actually, without the touch element today, but anyone who's interested could link arms with a staff member, and shut their eyes, and then their hand would be directed to like tactile points of interest. So, like the objects that we had from the collection, as well as like the building itself and, you know, the Guggenheim is like a big sculpture, really. And for some people, since like the Guggenheim is also like this tourist destination, it was some people's first time experiencing the museum, and it was with eyes closed, feeling their way through, so it really shifted their perception of that place.

This is from a series of projects I did in Ireland a few years ago. It -- at the Model Contemporary Art Centre in Sligo, Ireland. And I just responded to my own experience there, while I was there, and I found it really difficult to navigate the space on my own, because there's just a confusing lay-out. So, what I did is tie red strings to the things that already existed in the space. So like hand rails or like a table leg or something. And then these red strings indicated my most used routes, while I was there. So like, from the elevator to the cafe, from the cafe to the restroom or, you know, where else I needed to go in the museum. And I just used these as like tactile way finding -- a tactile way finding system. And it was something I just could like tie up and put -- take down. And yeah, it was also like a kind of line that indicated my movement through this space.

Another project that I did there was this, where I found a gallery that had like paintings from the permanent collection, and they're all

hung at like a typical height for a standing viewer. So, I requested they all be lowered, so they're just really close to the ground, so people would have to like problem solve their way to comfortably view the work. Yeah, and so -- and it really was an effort to like trouble or, you know, complicate that typical access or that common access. And while it kind of like was doing that, it also opened up access for young people, people who are wheelchair users, and it just invited more -- so, the average time for someone -- that someone spends with an artwork when they're walking through a gallery and just looking at work, it's like around 20 seconds. But like this kind of encouraged people to just like sit down and lie down and spend time looking at these works, which I thought was interesting.

So, I'm going to leave it there. I do have more to share, but we have a lot to do today. So, I think I'll just maybe take a couple of questions, if there are any, first. And then we can get on with our tours.

^E00:23:45