

LT Hello and welcome to another podcast from FACT Liverpool. My name is Lesley and I'm part of the team at FACT, the UK's leading organisation for the support and exhibition of art and film that embraces new technology and explores digital culture. We believe in enriching lives and shaping the future through film, art and creative technology. This podcast is called Re:Form and is part of a project by Tammy Reynolds, Natalia Bedkowska and Kallum Kiraly for FACT Together. The conversation centers mainly on their experience of producing a work which focuses on the disabled body. We hope you enjoy listening.

Track playing:

Song title: Hard Body

Artist: Trev Flash

NB This is Re:Form, by Tammy Reynolds, a queer, crip dwarf and me, Natalia Bedkowska, a queer, crip non-dwarf. Re:Form is a medley of visuals, audio and text exploring what happens when disabled people control the gaze. Full exhibition available at [reformexhibition.com](http://reformexhibition.com)

TR I am Tammy Reynolds, I also would like to introduce Dot Alma, our audio describer that we work with. They also do drag, and you can find them on instagrakm as @kallum\_kiralyi and they are a queer audio describer. I also want to thank Quiplash, who are the organisation that put us in touch with Dot in the first place, and offer queer audio description (AD) services.

We did an online exhibition with DaDaFest together, so thank you to DaDaFest, which is out now, This was basically exploring the dwarf body and having the audio description process alongside it, where the person describing the body was the person who had the body, and how important it was for that to be a possibility. What you're going to hear is just a bit of interaction with each other about audio describing some photos of me which you'll be able to find on the FACT website, thank you very much FACT for this commission. Seeing the images that we are describing and also us talking about why it's important to audio describe, and how interesting it can be as an experience not just to create access, but to actually explore how you want to communicate your identity to other people.

I think audio and image description reduces ego, encourages self awareness and increases a sense of responsibility. Now that everything's virtual, it's even more important to self-describe and communicate exactly who you are, whether that's the colour of your skin, your gender, your visible essence.

NB So I just wanted to thank, again, all the organisations involved in making this project happen. Thank you to Scale, who photographed the initial project, which was just an amazing experience and having the possibility to share

with you our vision and our ideas and concept. Thank you to everyone who helped us along the way.

TR Thank you very much! We promise this podcast won't be too long for you to have to listen to our beautiful voices talk. I think it's going to be around... 23 minutes 47 seconds, so I hope you enjoy that exact number that I have predicted will be the length of this, thank you!

DA (reading) A white female with dwarfism, I have short curly brown hair, I stand statuesque draped in cream material, as if in a Grecian robe. A white wall is behind me. A swirl of the cream fabric creeps towards the lens of the camera, snaking across a wooden floor. My right leg is slightly exposed, and I stare pensively to the left of the room. My right arm is held by my side, my left across my chest - my nails bold and red.

TR So I'm going to go and delve in a bit about this, because just hearing you describing that then, was weird because I'm thinking of this outside of what we've been doing before, now, and I'm hearing as a non-expert but after experiencing this already and hearing it separately, it's not just a learning thing now. It's an understanding of the process. Hearing you describe that in the first person sounded kind of absurd! Having someone audio describe me would be in the third person, like Dot, if you watched me perform, you would be playing in the third person, is that correct? Which seems so disconnected from me?

DA Like "she is standing", rather than "I am standing"

TR That seems really disconnected from what the idea of performance even is?

DA It comes into that thing I was talking about, things being subjective and objective; because if you're doing audio description, it's coming out of your lens, so it's always going to be coming out of my lens and the way I am describing people. So I can do as much as physically possible to be informed of how that person wants to be described, and again, that's being a queer audio describer and working for a lot of queer performers, if that makes sense?

NB You would kind of include different type of describing and different words depending on who you're describing, and what their vibe is and what kind of person they are, something that you would audio describe for a queer performer would not be the same as for a spoken word poet. You'd use different words, different emotions to fit with the personality of whoever you are describing.

TR But then it's more of an interpretation unless you've had a conversation with the person beforehand. Like you as an audio describer, as an independent person outside of that world are capable of interpreting it from your own lens and then that being interpreted by whoever is accessing your service. I've had a thing of when I've had to tell audio describers or access workers

during a performance, even with works digitally recently, I've had to reassure them that they're safe to describe me in this way. They become a gatekeeper if they don't adhere to that. That's why I think it's interesting working with the queer audio describer, because they understand the importance of accuracy.

- NB I don't think anyone would give us justice as to who we are as performers, if it wasn't someone like you Dot. It would be a different experience that I probably wouldn't want to have.
- TR So with this one, would you describe me in this order, what's going on in the foreground essentially and then...
- DA I would definitely identify that you're there first. So do you want me to start this description as if we haven't seen you before?
- TR I think so, because it could potentially... all of these aren't necessarily speaking to each other in the same way.
- NB Yes, so this isn't just the background and pretty picture, this is the whole, raw thing of what we see. And that's what we want people to see, because this is the real picture. So we're revealing the space but we're also revealing you in a kind of intimate moment of "this is me". If the idea of the project was to show people how your body looks and what better way than a candid photo of you just being yourself, and me just sitting back.
- KK Okay great, so would you like me to start again, just with your person description? It's whether you want me to - I'm stood in this room, and then describe what you look like, and what you're wearing and how you're standing? Or do you want to start immediately with "this is what I look like", then this is what the rest of the photograph looks like?
- TR I'm going to pose a question back to you...
- KK Oh, go on!
- TR Which is... as someone who is seeing this photo, and as someone who is seeing me, is the most stand-out thing the fact that I'm a dwarf first, or is it what the dwarf is doing, and the fact that they're a dwarf?
- DA My immediate train of thought is: there's a person standing in a photography studio, they have dwarfism, they're wearing this, and they're posing like this.
- TR In that order? So it's: set up, dwarfism, studio?
- KK That's how I get the feeling of how I want to describe it
- TR Otherwise, it feels a bit like, I as a dwarf with an agenda behind this image, wanting it to be dwarf visibility

DA If you feel that's the impact that you want behind the photograph, then you can describe it that way round

TR But then I think, no, because that feels a bit too controlling in some way? I want people to be open to the interpretation of it. I think the main thing is that I want to include the fact that I'm a dwarf. In the past I've had people audio describe me and not mentioned that I'm a dwarf, so the fact that it's mentioned is enough for me. I just like to make sure that it's not with a "dwarf propaganda state!"

DA I've just caught what you've said, that audio describers have not acknowledged that you have dwarfism?

TR That's literally happened. They've just said "woman" or "performer" or something, and it's so important to know who it is on stage.

NB Absolutely

DA When people decide not to describe race for example, and potentially white describers are doing this with a view that means "I'm describing people equally" but actually it's an eraser of someone's race, and might potentially - I don't know what it felt like for you - but if someone's disability isn't being described, it feels a bit strange.

TR It did feel a bit like that, and the main thing is that I am visible as a dwarf all of the time, so then for someone to decide at the time I want to be visible the most, they don't let me be. It almost erases all of the struggle, or maybe that's not the right word, the discrimination I have faced, to get to that point. It kind of feels like it's not being regarded. It's so rare to have audio description anyway, it needs to be way more used - BSL I would say seems to be used more than audio description is, and I think that now I've had to be moved on to a more static form of visual art, I don't always get to explain and define myself and who sees me.

DA I've kind of said "I lift folds of the material off my left leg" but would it work me saying "my bare left leg" so it's not sexy but it's descriptive?

TR Yeah, it's demonstrating that I'm not wearing anything.

NB Yes it's a lot nicer, it doesn't imply anything that could be in a way sexy or anything like that, but it's still nice and intimate and is more of a gracious way of describing the body.

DA Such a beautiful colour combination!

TR Thank you, I knew exactly what I was doing.

DA Do you want me to put something about the fact that your nipples are slightly visible?

- TR Ooh! Yes please! Why do you think I've gone to all that effort?
- NB Nothing makes sense until it's audio described!
- TR It's not valid unless it's audio described. Does body weight or body shape ever come into it when you've done audio describing in the past? I know a lot of people who are fat activists / fat performers, and identify as fat, and I wonder how they get audio described, if they do?
- DA I think with the process that I go through for AD, I ask for people's person descriptions, so they get that choice of how their body should be described. It's difficult, because I think in British English we shy away from describing people's body shapes, or if we end up describing people's body shapes we go totally the other way and end up using very shaming language. Again, for me, it goes back to making sure the person being described is comfortable and has control of their narrative.
- NB Where some of us would feel comfortable revealing and presenting our body type out loud with the AD, with its belly, hips or that kind of stuff, not every performer is ready to expose that or be ready to hear that about themselves, and they might want to protect their own vision of how they want to be perceived. I guess it's just how they feel about themselves sometimes.
- DA With AD there's that thing of you don't want to gate-keep information from anyone using the service, so for example, I would never describe myself as a short black person, because I am neither of those things. So I do think it's important to be accurate about the way you are describing a person, but there are so many different ways and so much different language that you can use to describe people.
- TR So I'm thinking, me looking at that, I fluctuate between identifying as fat sometimes, and not. There's not shame attached to it necessarily, but I don't want to take up space in the fat community when I'm passing as not fat. I wonder if there is a fat performer on a stage (and I am using the term "fat" as a positive, not negative statement) but I wonder if the AD would make the executive decision if they hadn't had a conversation beforehand? In the same way as there is with the word "midget" there are negative connotations that would restrict them from using it? Which then the sighted person, or the person not using AD would benefit from the cultural importance of what that person's doing on stage. I find it so interesting!
- NB You choose how you're going to make that journey of discovering how your body looks, and what parts are taking more time to describe than others, because contextually it makes sense with the idea of the project.
- TR There's also a whole thing to reference - that I think shame has a huge part of how people learn to identify themselves: there's fat shaming, there's body shaming.

- DA I think its been really interesting with you Tammy, as someone who's not a dwarf, I think I've asked a lot of questions, and I think I've tried as far as possible to give you the autonomy to carry how you want to be described, but I also do realise that that's potentially a lot of emotional labour to put on someone, to be like "okay, you need to tell me all these things". So on one hand I get people to describe themselves quite a lot, but then I;m like "am I actually asking an awful lot of emotional labour of people, to potentially be describing themselves to me?"
- TR I find it the opposite, because I find it a bit more freeing. I'd rather be able to do it straight away than have to hear it be wrong and become aware of the fact that there is a world out there that wouldn't be able to describe me correctly. I mean I would feel very tired after our meetings, and that would be nothing to do with you, on reflection, you, I was just spending up to 4 hours sometimes looking at photos of me, getting it absolutely right, having it read back to me whilst looking at the photo. I think it's a very humbling experience which is strange, but it's equally not humbling because it's so narcissistic in some ways! Very strange combination.
- DA Yeah I was reading back through the ones we've just done and I was thinking is it really repetitive? Is it going to read really oddly if people read it one after the other, and actually I don't know, I kind of like it, because there's this repetition of the phrase "I'm a white female with dwarfism"
- TR It probably reads and sounds a bit like a poem as well, having a kind of mantra.
- NB I genuinely learn words which is really exciting because we're trying to find new words to describe the same thing, then we throw in some poetic words and I genuinely learn words through AD. I was discovering from the AD of my own work, different words and I thought that was one of the most brilliant things you can do with your own work, your own project, your own art, give it to someone to AD - you'll never look at it the same way. It opens up so many doors and windows about what you're doing.
- TR Haha! I like that you included windows...
- DA Would you describe this as a close up of you?
- TR Yes I'd say so.
- NB I love that little tight curl that is just showing on the background, makes it feel really natural and really candid.
- DA I kind of want to say something about this strand, this curl of hair that you're describing Natalia, and I wanted to ask you Tammy, how much you want to describe the look of your arms, or whether you want me to be quite neutral in how I'm describing you? At the moment I'm quite neutral, I'm just like "I'm looking down at my arm with a small tattoo of a sausage dog".

- TR No, I think you're right, I'm really obsessed with the way that my right arm looks. If my arms look like non-dwarf arms I would just say "arms" because they're not different.
- NB Especially talking now, I appreciate the body and the skin and the natural wave, and I like that description of dynamic skin movement, where you can see parts of the rolls, or you can see waves of skin going across your arm, and it's so exciting to be able to listen and create the same project for everyone, but see it in all those different lights and those different perspectives.
- TR I do enjoy how much you love saying "lights" it's gorgeous, See we do have fun, it's not just disabled stuff!
- DA For me this whole thing of having control of the narrative and how you're described being very much in your hands, and having you describing yourself solidifies that even more.
- TR I agree, and it's been giving me thoughts about how if there was a world where everyone could self-describe themselves, and they would be the first people to do that, then the world would be a better place.
- NB I think such a huge part of it could be people not describing, but people judging, and that's a problem that people run into that they run into with an AD they don't have anything in common with.
- DA Weel, thank you so much for trusting me to describe you!
- TR I think from our first phone call it was very quickly apparent that we had similar feelings towards this experience, so it's nice, thank you.
- KK It's been an absolute pleasure working with both of you, you're both stone cold legends.
- TR We are stoned, cold legends.
- All (Laughter)
- LT Thank you for listening. We'd love to hear your thoughts. Let us know what you think by following us on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. This project is part of FACT Together, a new online commissioning scheme to support Northern artists in lockdown. To find out more, visit [fact.co.uk/together](https://fact.co.uk/together). Don't forget you can subscribe to our podcast! Whether you are listening through Spotify, Apple Music or somewhere else, subscribe now to receive notifications of new episodes. You can also stay up to date by subscribing to our weekly newsletter, simply head to [fact.co.uk/newsletter](https://fact.co.uk/newsletter). Take care, stay safe and stay connected.