

## Rushton lecture 2024

I'm Kaite O'Reilly, a mature white Irish female writer, theatre maker and dramaturg with short asymmetric curly brown hair going grey and blue eyes behind glasses. It is an immense privilege to be invited to give this talk – thank you – and I am honoured to share this platform with previous speakers whom I admire and revere, and also our distinguished panellists and chair.

In this talk I'm going to say 'we' and 'us' a lot. When I speak of 'we' I mean disabled, Deaf and neurodivergent people, the survivors and users of the mental health system, those with long term illnesses and conditions who, for brevity and efficiency, I will condense into 'we' or the term 'disabled'. As we know, "nothing about us without us", and we are legion – I hope my squeezing us under one umbrella term will be acceptable, given our time together is limited.

Rage.

Anger is often the response to injustice, to violence, to oppression, so for self-care during this where I will be addressing strong subjects, please hold onto hope and optimism – both are disciplines, they require practice so please, practice. I'm speaking about anger today in the context of social justice and disability arts and culture – but first I need to acknowledge what is currently happening in the world – the rise of the right - genocide, famine, and war continuing despite global demos and boycotts and thousands upon thousands taking to the streets, to petitions, and social media campaigns. Environmental damage continues despite the irrefutable evidence of climate change and the tipping point is evoked yet again – we are for the umpteenth time at the eleventh hour.

We have cause for anger – but not despair. As Greta Thunberg said to world leaders in 2019 at the UN Climate Action Summit. 'People are suffering.... Entire ecosystems are collapsing. How dare you!... We will

not let you get away with this... The world is waking up. And change is coming, whether you like it or not.”

So let us be filled with hope and optimism and unity - and be of good heart.

RAGE ON: The Uses of Anger (after Audre Lorde)

*Ableism and Audism*. Definition:

The discrimination of and social prejudice against people based on the belief that other bodies, senses and neurology are superior, thereby giving them the right to dominate, patronise and try to ‘fix’. The assumption that disabled, Deaf and neurodivergent people are lesser, require medicalisation and normalisation, or otherwise be made to disappear.

Ableism and audism creates a world designed not just *for* non-disabled hearing people but *to exclude* disabled and Deaf people. It is a form of oppression.

My response? Rage.

I have been angry most of my life. Lived experience of discrimination, the intersectionality of my identities combined with an intolerance of social injustice creates a friction, a blistering energy that burns. I have lived with that anger, on that anger, beneath that anger, on top of that anger, ignoring that anger, suppressing that anger, feeding upon that anger, until finally learning to use that anger. Some years ago, somewhere along my raging, cursing way, I encountered Gandhi’s advice about anger and being the change you want to see. I discovered my righteous wrath was a tool best directed into creative form – what I hope has been a type of cultural activism.

I’m part of a long and proud tradition of disabled people utilising rage for action: the visually impaired poet, abolitionist, protestor and campaigner Edward Rushton, under whose name and shadow I present this talk. I follow the example of Frida Kahlo, whose satirical painting ‘A

Few Little Pricks' transformed her anger at violence against women into an astonishing work of art which disturbs and disrupts, bears witness and reveals, with horror and repugnance, the bloody nature of the cruelty some women experience at the hands of some men. I applaud the artistic activism of the brilliant Dolly Sen, who wants what she calls 'more disabled rage ... so we can stop being ghosts and start being proud flesh.'

We have every reason to be angry.

#### ELLEN CLIFFORD BOOK COVER

As Ellen Clifford states in her book – 'The War on Disabled People – Capitalism, welfare and the making of a human catastrophe' – prior to 2010 the UK was known as a world leader in disability. However, the coalition government decided that this progress had gone too far – an approach continued by successive Conservative administrators from 2015. A fast reverse made it the first time in modern social policy, Clifford claims, that things had gone backwards for disabled people. This was to pay for a financial crisis, except politicians couldn't reveal themselves in this cruel light, and so a narrative was spun, blaming disabled people ourselves – demonising, dehumanising, criminalising, making us benefit cheats. These attacks – which continue - are hidden in plain sight owing to the socio-economic structures that value humans on productivity, that segregate and divide us. Austerity and welfare reform decimated the most vulnerable in our society, while decisions were simultaneously made which benefited the rich and helped the highest earners – described by the chair of the UN's Disability Committee as "a human catastrophe." These were deliberate political choices.

We have every reason to rage.

Even when we hoped things might change under a new government, welfare reform is being used yet again as a weapon by the current Labour government against benefit claimants – although it has been proven that fraud accounts for only 1% of the cost of Personal

Independence Payment, or PIP. Just last week the Labour Prime minister vowed to cut disability benefits by £3billion, using stigmatising language towards claimants and those in poverty, a harmful narrative in the very week when he pushed through, at speed, the assisted dying bill.

We have every reason to be angry. And vigilant.

In October the Guardian newspaper reported how employment advisers will be stationed in NHS hospitals under plans to make finding a job a central part of mental health treatment. NHS care will be focused on helping the long-term sick back to work, ministers saying it is central to growing the economy and bringing down the benefits bill, controlling the 'spiralling costs to the taxpayer'. Unfortunately, the tone is again negative, suggesting that we're unwilling to work rather than being too ill to do so.

John Pring, founder and editor of Disability News Service, said labour's DWP - Department of Work and Pensions fraud bill 'will be recipe for abuse and miscarriages of justice' – giving wider powers to snoop, with a lower burden of proof. Campaign group Big Brother Watch found that bank account surveillance and monitoring powers are likely to breach privacy law Article 8 – the right to live your life privately without government interference - and could amount to 'unlawful discrimination' with 'disproportionate impact on particular groups, including disabled people, people of colour, women and older people'.

The DWP – the Department of Work and Pensions - has already contributed to over 600 suicides.

## JOHN PRING BOOK COVER

John Pring has created a devastating and meticulously researched book 'The Department: How a Violent Government Bureaucracy killed hundreds and hid the evidence,' providing proof of an ongoing national scandal which the DWP cannot dispute or possibly justify. The time for an independent inquiry into these deaths linked to the social security

system and a fatally flawed disability assessment is long overdue and, following the publication of this book, the UK government should be called to account. It is a clarion call for disability justice, what MP John McDonnell has called 'the definitive proof of how government austerity hasn't just harmed disabled people, it has killed them.'

Over 10 thousand people died in the months following an assessment when they were deemed fit for work.

Despite a decade of independent reviews of PIP – Personal Independence Payment assessment, UN condemnation, coroners saying benefit reforms have contributed to peoples' deaths and documentaries like Richard Butchin's 'The Million Pound Disability Payout' or Dolly Sen's 'Broken Hearts for DWP' - despite all this what panellist Julie Mc has called 'a very quiet slaughter of disabled people' has continued and in plain sight.

But protest art continues also.

## **BENEFITS STOPPED. STARVED TO DEATH SHROUD BY VINCE LAWS**

Vince Laws DWP Deaths Make Me Sick is a growing series of work protesting the deaths caused by the callous way the Government's policies are implemented without proper safeguarding for sick and disabled people. Startlingly, Laws uses shrouds spray painted with legends of some of those killed by the DWP's benefit assessment. When hung together the dramatic installation reads like a charge sheet on the avoidable deaths. Laws's artwork states: 'Dead People don't Claim'. He also includes a statement that 'the DWP's response to concerns about death rates was to stop publishing them.'

We have every reason to be angry.

But anger gets a bad press. Aristotle warned against it, feeling it was one of the baser emotions, reactive to a perceived slight or violation, fuelled by the desire for revenge. For millennia we've been taught to fear it, distrust it, to consider it as always destructive, but this is not the

case. We need to uncouple anger from aggression – when rage is tempered and directed, it is a transformative energy.

As Maya Angelou said in 2006:

“You should be angry. You must not be bitter. Bitterness is like cancer. It eats upon the host. It doesn’t do anything to the object of its displeasure. So use that anger. You write it. You paint it. You dance it. You march it. You vote it. You do everything about it. You talk it. Never stop talking it.”

To slightly reframe Audre Lorde’s feminist statement, every disabled person probably has a well-stocked arsenal of anger which could be useful against the oppressions which originally brought that anger into being. Focused with precision, it can become a powerful source of energy, serving progress and change.

John Pring’s painstaking, compassionate journalism is an example of tempered anger directed for good.

## BLOCK TELETHON IMAGE

The Block Telethon protests of 1990 and 1992 are examples of disabled people harnessing anger for social change. They mark two pivotal points in British disability activism when the Disabled People’s Movement and the emerging Disability Arts Movement joined in an explosion of protest and creativity against the pity porn displays of TV charity fundraiser Telethon, insisting Rights, not Charity, and urging us to Piss On Pity. With protest songs, artwork, cabaret and performance, it created a festival-like event of celebration and community – and succeeded in stopping the dreadful Telethon with its ableist tropes and problematic stereotypes of disabled people, so beginning the slow process of making broadcasters and viewers perceive us differently.

As activist Barbara Lisicki said of that day:

‘I’ve called our ’92 protest a demo. But it was far more than that. It was a display of collective rage by disabled people, angry at the broadcast media for stealing our image and our dignity. And it was also a party, a

celebration, a gathering of up to two thousand disabled people and our supporters showing that we were proud, angry and strong. We were the Ungrateful Disabled. A force to be reckoned with.'

This is one use of anger: uniting people for a common cause. Anger is valuable not just for the individual, but for those around them.

Philosopher Alison Jagger claims anger is an emotion that transcends and unites people - by giving context for an individual's grievance it enables others to identify similarities in their lived experience, overcoming superficial differences that drive them apart. In my own experience, previous to the Disabled Peoples Political Movement and DAN, Direct Action Network, we had been segregated, told people with different conditions and impairments had nothing in common. The protests and cabarets after days of action enabled us to come together, socialise, share stories, empathise, to see we had more in common – the experience of exclusion - than difference. The catalyst for all this was anger at inaccessible public transport and buildings - a denial of civil rights from a deficit model approach which judged us and found us lacking.

This could be an example of anger activism, a model being developed by Dr Monique Turner of Michigan State University, perceiving anger not as negative, but as a positive motivator in behaviour change. As we know, anger can be the precursor to social activism that motivates people to act on their sense of injustice or concern – what some might call righteous anger – but that assumes a positive outcome, about inclusivity and equity. There are always opposing perspectives on what is fair and just, and the powerful tool of anger is not without its dangerous elements, as we saw earlier this year with far right, anti-immigration protests and riots. The sense of being overlooked and ignored can create a rage born of frustration and impotence, which can lash out indiscriminately in violence, or with a chilling targeted focus.

'We must all learn to use anger intelligently,' Mahatma Gandhi advised, comparing the dynamic energy of rage to electricity. 'When we channel electricity intelligently, we can use it to improve our life, but if we abuse

it, we could die. So as with electricity, we must learn to use anger wisely for the good of humanity.'

This is, I believe, something Edward Rushton, under whose name I speak, practised throughout his life. A tireless campaigner during the emerging Human Rights discourse, he spoke out against abuses of human rights wherever he encountered it, from the kidnapping and trafficking of people in the slave trade to the oppression and mistreatment of disabled people and the working class in Liverpool and elsewhere.

But what of those who didn't have the opportunity to speak out or give vent to their rage at maltreatment and injustice? What if you are denied access to materials, to a platform, to freedom? For some time I've been fascinated by the radical embroidery work of women incarcerated in nineteenth century asylums and workhouses – particularly Agnes Richter, a German seamstress with scoliosis who was held against her will in two different asylums for the final three decades of her life.

#### AGNES RICHTER JACKET

Richter's stitching served as a symbol of both protest against and control over her dismal situation. She stitched her anger into a jacket she tailored to her particular dimensions, a garment made from institutional linen which still carries the marks of her protest, along with her sweat. It's a powerful artefact – the written record of her experience during 26 years of non-consensual incarceration, stitched onto a symbol of her institutionalisation – allowing her reflections and rage to reach beyond the asylum's walls.

There has been a long tradition of protest and lived experience being documented in furious embroidery and textile work – traditionally considered women's work – these needlewomen left their mark and found agency in whatever limited way they could, repurposing thread and scraps of material or, as Agnes, on the uniform of her imprisonment.



This is a use of anger as transformed self-expression, as protest against enforced incarceration and resistance to apparently powerless situations. I've often imagined Agnes in the last 26 years of her life, bristling with purpose and rage, wearing her protest and non-compliance vividly, on her own back, as living autobiographical art – such a defiant act of creative endurance, opposition and resilient individuality.

Other disabled artists utilising whatever material can come to hand is the late Donald Rodney, who used his own dried skin obtained following a hip replacement operation held together with dressmaker's pins to create the tiny house of his 1997 sculpture *My Mother, My Father, My Sister, My Brother*.

### DONALD RODNEY'S SKIN SCULPTURE

Originally part of the BLK Art Group and AYBs – Angry Young Blacks - an art movement, The Guardian claims, which rocked Thatcher – Donald Rodney's work is powerful, political and intersectional, focusing on race, black masculinities and his othering as a black disabled man – the fragility of black space coupled with the fragility of his own body.

Rodney was often hospitalised for treatment for sickle cell anaemia, and he acquired X-rays cheaply as a waste product of the hospital system. These quickly became one of his primary media.

### DONALD RODNEY'S BRITANNIA HOSPITAL

His 1988 series, *Britannia Hospital*, uses x-rays and a figure based on Frida Kahlo's famous *Broken Column* self-portrait, except Rodney replaces Kahlo's face with that of Londoner Cherry Groce, who was paralysed after being shot indiscriminately by the Metropolitan police during a botched raid on her family home in 1985, an outrage which sparked the Brixton Riots of that year. For Rodney, x-rays were a way to look beneath the surface and examine the social and political ills in British society and its systemic racism.

Approached with conscious intention, with Rodney's rigorous analysis, anger is a vital diagnostic instrument. Gandhi saw anger as a warning

something was wrong - a radar for injustice. 'Every time you feel great anger,' he said, 'stop and write down who or what caused your feelings and why you reacted so angrily. The goal is to get to the root of the anger. Only when you understand the source can you find a solution.'

We have every reason to be angry.

There have been a spate of books around women's rage since Trump first took office and the MeToo Movement - Soraya Chemaly's *Rage Becomes Her: The Power of Women's Anger*; *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower* by Brittney Cooper and *Good and Mad: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Anger* by Rebecca Traister – to name just three.

All three argue that our anger is not only justified, it is also an active part of the solution. We are so often encouraged to resist our rage or are punished for justifiably expressing it, yet how many achievements in social justice, or cultural expression, would never have been initiated without the spark of anger that fuelled them, that fire in the belly?

On the flip side, the societal and cultural belittlement of our anger is a crafty way of limiting and controlling our power – we're portrayed as the hysterical, over-emotional female, the unhinged, unstable disabled person – we've been taught that rage in anyone other than a white male is ugly, threatening, unnatural or frightening. It's no wonder that many activist artists have transformed their anger into a different format – for humour and satire.

Some of our movement's earliest protest songs were a mixture of anger at injustice and dry humour - a key tactic for early artist activists like Ian Stanton – satirising the non-disabled attitudes he'd met and his refusal to, in the lyrics of one of his songs: 'be grateful/For all we do for you/And be a quiet little crip/Without a chip.'

CHRISTINE SUN KIM – SHIT HEARING PEOPLE SAY TO ME

Similarly, Deaf Rage artist Christine Sun Kim has a series of artwork entitled 'Shit hearing people say to me.' Within her themes of trauma,

inequality, autism and oppression, a sly humour runs through Kim's work. When she began to interact more regularly in hearing communities, she claims she often turned to humour as a way to connect, and this strategy also plays out in her approach to artmaking. 'Humour puts people at ease, so I wasn't so serious,' she explains. 'People feel much more comfortable when there's a little humour involved...'

Similarly, the brilliant late great Katherine Araniello made hilarious, irreverent, politically astute work to deflate and critique problematic images, attitudes or appropriations. One case in point is her response to Damien Hirst's 'Charity', an outsized appropriation of the Scope charity collection boxes that used to be common on UK streets, featuring a young girl wearing a calliper and holding a teddy bear. The puff around this 22 foot sculpture was that it aimed to 'challenge perceptions' and 'encourage conversations' about disability, a pose quickly deflated by Colin Hambrook of Disability Arts Online, who caustically described Hirst's work as '... yet another example of 'disability' being used and exploited by the rich and powerful as a commodity for trafficking ideas and power.' As has often been the case, criticisms and concerns about representation from the disability arts communities were dismissed, and the problematic work of art continued to be exhibited, most prominently next to 'the gherkin' building in central London in 2015.

Katherine Araniello had already addressed Scope's collection boxes in 'Pity', a work from 2013, where, dressed in a blue plastic dress and blonde papier mâché wig, she presented herself as 'a living charity collection doll' embodying the original intentions – to obtain cash donations through milking the sense of superiority and pity from pedestrians via a sad, downcast child with CP.

## THE CRIPPLED GERKIN

When Hirst's problematic statue was displayed in the city of London, Araniello collaborated with Simon Raven on *The Crippled Gherkin*, a filmed performance of the pair attempting to sell pickled gherkins in

front of *Charity*. 'Made by Damien Hirst on his farm with the little spastics!'

## PISS ON PITY – DISABLED ARTISTS V CHARITY

This endlessly inventive, raging, anarchic live art, performance and video artist is much missed and the 2019 exhibition of Piss On Pity – Disabled Artists Vs Charity, curated by Gill Crawshaw, was dedicated to her memory.

So this creative raging about injustice, this sense of needing to challenge and so transform, is important. Araniello exemplifies another way of using anger effectively – with humour and irreverence, which makes me think of the Raging Grannies, a movement originating in 1980's Canada but still ongoing, where fearless women elders challenge stereotypical conceptions about activism and aging while undermining power structures and authority with direct action happenings, silly songs and colourful costumes.

This combination of self-deprecating humour, righteous anger and the subverting of expectations of older women's behaviour was seen on the streets of Liverpool in August during the protests and riots with Nans against Nazism – anti-racist activists taking a stance against fascism, racism and hate, becoming human shields outside potential targets such as mosques and asylum seeker centres. 'I'm here to support the mosque if the fascists turn up,' one of the activists, Pat, 71, told the Liverpool Echo. 'We need to show we oppose racist fascism wherever it is. We've got a good record of opposing them in this city... We need to show them we're not afraid.'

Often anger escalates the battle when people become intimidating, to try and force others to do what they want. Gandhi advises on keeping an anger journal, to get distance and calm, to strengthen the will of the mind in order to control responses and so eventually be more effective. Displaying anger can be counterproductive and provoke similar responses, so the examples of women elders with fire in their bellies being defenders of justice with calm open faces and self-deprecating

placards - or imam Adam Kelwick, greeting potential agitators at the mosque gates with burgers and drinks - transmutes anger, instead offering conversation and exchange. The most dangerous anger is one committed to never questioning or examining itself, but with an absolute unwavering insistence on being right. The imam's invitation for engagement, his offer of dialogue and exchange whilst breaking bread together is transformative alchemy. How different the confrontation and experience of virtual anger on social media – uses of anger I do not endorse.

We know the toxicity of right wing social media warriors, the rage emojis, the grandiose illusion that a smartphone is a global megaphone, blasting out furious convictions to a potential massive audience. It cultivates a kind of anger which is impersonal, often anonymous, but also self-important – the antithesis of the constructive uses of anger I have been addressing. Writer and psychoanalyst Josh Cohen writing in The Observer claims 'For the populist agitator, the aim seems to be not to identify a real injustice and set out the appropriate relief but, on the contrary, to stoke a rage for which there can be no relief, to induce a kind of permanent mass enervation.'

Some political commentators have identified this form of aggressive rage with no clear catharsis, just generalised slogans like 'taking back control' or 'make America great again' as being partially responsible for voting decisions around Brexit and the recent US election. It creates an exhausting, impotent rage chained to aggression and hate with no procedure or form, where fear and suspicion of any kind of difference moves quickly into an assumption and expectation of antagonism. It breeds suspicion and a tendency to be on guard, separated into silos, where disagreement and difference leads not to discussion and exchange, but antagonism and mutual cancellation - a useful tool for governance – divide and rule.

Or, in other contexts, frustration arises when we are taking action but seemingly not having any impact – nothing changes, despite the size of the crowds, and the volume of our protest. In these circumstances, we

can turn our frustrations inwards, becoming angry at each other but not the system, which is how it continues, undefeated. We need to resist blaming the players and instead start questioning the game.

There is an alchemy in transforming the base metal of undirected anger into the gold of consequential action via protest, resistance, and expression. And this is what art and culture can do - raise the questions, challenge the established status quo, provoke empathy and cultivate not uncertainty but the liberating 'what if...'?

I've been inspired by the description of performance research project Engine of Embers, part of ARC's Make New Work Programme for March 2025, inviting members of the Stockton and Tees Valley community to collaborate in an experiment releasing and transmuting rage into an engine to power a performance. Toi are offering a safe space to engage with collective rage, voice frustrations and concerns, 'pierce through apathy and warm up passionate forces in our spirits to create change.'

I think this is a great example of a strategy, harnessing individual rage into a collaborative creative exchange which may have positive repercussions.

We have every reason to rage, but we need to use that energy to our advantage - to come together again and find our strength in unity and numbers, collaborating creatively and rebuilding the Disabled peoples Political Movement – whose decline, ironically, Ellen Clifford explains is because of the success of inclusion – greater participation by individuals has removed the basis for collectivism.

My call is for us to come together once more. As Deborah Williams exhorted in the 2020 Rushton lecture: 'Reconnect, reimagine, and reclaim - if we don't do it, and if we don't do it now, it will be everything about us without us.'

There is so much to lose, so much to gain. But to be activists, to combine and sustain campaigning for what is often a long process towards change is exhausting, and risks burnout. Which brings me to

another important use of anger, as identified by my guiding light throughout this process, Mahatma Gandhi: 'Anger to people is like gas to the automobile,' he wrote ' – it fuels you to move forward and get to a better place. Without it, we would not be motivated to rise to a challenge. It is energy that compels us to define what is just and unjust. Move the world with love, not fear.'

And that perhaps is the most impactful use of anger – as a crucible - the cleansing, transformative fire to burn away hatred, insisting instead on empathy, equity, and social justice.

We have every reason to be angry. Let us direct this justified anger outwards, a tool and force for change. Let us collectively use our rage for good – united, let us move the world together, not with fear or hatred, but justice and love.

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