

lines in my ear – it was horrible.

MA: I would find it difficult to hear my disembodied voice.

**KB:** How long did you work on this video project?

SO: It took a few months of research, writing and editing interspersed with other work, that is. The collection of footage happened in a rush over a month, with much editing. I love editing! It's an exciting process, where a fiddle with a frame can totally change the meaning and readability of an image. Writing the script is the quickest part as I'm used to writing, although the compression of research into the script takes a week or two. But it can take forever if you let it.

MA: How do you decide when to stop collating your material?

SO'R: Deadlines – it's entirely limited by other people!

MA: Your process reminds me of a cabinet of curiosities.

SO'R: The trick is to find a container. The great thing about Implicosphere was the limit of its size – the content was always falling off the edge. We could only fit so much on it. With the video, there wasn't a narrative arc as such. The structure was in the writing but

led by the material.

KB: Did you expect to be offered the post of writer-in-residence at the Whitechapel Gallery?

SO'R: Not at all – I thought they wouldn't want someone who was undisciplined.

**KB:** What does writing mean to you and how is it different from the other aspects of your work?

SO'R: Like swimming instead of galumphing through mud, like public speaking does. When I was at school I would blush at the teacher calling the register. That people think I can talk for hours on end is unbelievable. With writing that pressure falls away and I can engage totally with what is being written instead of experiencing a disassociating anxiety about its reception.

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## Transmission *P r o v o c a t i o n*

**Guest:** Sally O'Reilly

**Host:** Michelle Atherton

**Interviewer:** Keith Barley

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MA: I liked how your film *A Rolling Stone: the Dynamics of Cliché* drew out the complexity of cliché. What drew you to the cliché?

SO'R: I am attracted to ideas or words that appear to be knowable but the closer you look at them the more they undo themselves. There is an unexpected polarity in the cliché.

MA: Many of the examples were most interesting when they were comic. There seems to be a trend of the comic in art. The comic cannot be easily categorised.

SO'R: It's slippery! Laughter is both binding and distancing. We find ourselves in multiple positions; we place ourselves anywhere along the line from victim to perpetrator. The comic

in the most absurdist bracket of consideration is not a fixed issue. It encompasses a full range of emotional experience.

MA: The comic is concerned with language, as is the cliché. The film brought out how in the language is condensed and prefigured, and when the cliché becomes comic that dislocates language. We see language functioning.

SO'R: The cliché becomes comic at the moment of recognition, when the familiar becomes absurd in its familiarity. That's the classic commentary about laughter, anyway: it erupts through disruption of an apparent veneer.

MA: The provocation lies in movement.

SO'R: It's like gestalt theory – you have a theory that you don't give much attention to, but when placed in a context where it makes a sidestep or turns at an angle, you see it for its functioning self rather than its assumed linguistic meaning. The gestalt moment is when you see it as an object as opposed to a camouflaged element of a whole, i.e. the duck/rabbit moment. It's a classic shift of perception, a perceptual moment, provocative enough in itself, but

when signposting social exchange (which is what a cliché is for) it has many functions beyond language. It has an exchange value, which might be about complicity. Like when someone's reading through a list and says, 'last but not least'. It doesn't mean there is any judgement about the things on the list; it's a signal that we are at the end. The secondary function makes visible the invisible structures of social interaction, which provokes an ontological shift.

MA: There is the discussion of irony and the difficulties that people have with cliché in the art work, which seems to mirror that polarity.

SO'R: There are three positions: one is that somebody falls into cliché because they don't have the imagination to come up with an innovative way of expressing the idea; secondly, they may wield it with irony, knowing it's a cliché; thirdly, maybe somebody has got to this point through their own reasoning from first principles. It might be an authentic use of something they are not aware of as a cliché. That's particularly interesting about cliché in art – all three are possible. Five years ago we would have defaulted to the ironic reading, but that became tiring – perhaps people want to mean what they say now.

MA: Sincerity is also problematic.

SO'R: In art authenticity is problematic. There are many cadences of utterance between sincerity, authenticity, and irony.

MA: What about making the film?

SO'R: It's written around a simple premise, which may be traced to Bataille's *Critical Dictionary*: anti-academic in its non-desire to know. I don't mean that learning doesn't exist – experience does inform behaviour – but knowledge ... it's impossible!

MA: Yet we live in a time that is institutionalised in terms of knowledge and research.

SO'R: When you assess students for learning outcomes, analysis, and interpretative work, there are key words that encapsulate ways the brain interacts with learning and understanding. It is a complex multi-access model placing the mind in relation to information, but it's a static structure and I cannot believe in that ever!

MA: There is another movement allowing things to settle and solidify more naturally, without irony. I think it is important to pick up on current changes in approaches, to take note of when things shift.

SO'R: I was talking to a student recently about gender politics in art – you rarely see men painting women now, and when you do, it's like the John Curran episode in the video: it's difficult to know at what level of irony he's operating. Women represent women all the time, but you rarely see women painting men's bits. I'm not sure what that's got to do with sincerity and irony – that's a bit of a tangent.

MA: That tangent is part of dialogue around who is given the authority, at any given point, to express experience.

SO'R: Anthropologists hand over the means of production to the subject because they struggled with the problems of subjectivity and objectivity. Artists say they are not anthropologists, being in the business of representation, and they can represent the other however they like. Art doesn't have the same remit.

MA: One of my students has been painting nude women; he received a greater cross-examination than any other student – that's the legacy.

SO'R: But aren't artists willing to relax the political expectations of their work, to be subjectively engrossed in their own practice instead of objectively representing their ideas?

MA: Discussion about the autonomy of the art object seems to have returned.

SO'R: Authorship is coming back!

KB: We are speaking several weeks after viewing your film. You weren't at its screening. How did it feel be absent?

SO'R: It felt like writing. In writing you must have confidence in building a world in which the pursuit of your quarry and the logic of that pursuit holds up, and then you can send it out. I am nowhere near as practised in filmmaking as in writing. In writing you start, it's terrible, you read it back, you hear your voice, and you refine it until it says what you want it to say and your self-conscious voice seems to recede. It was difficult to let go of the film because it hadn't reached the state of refinement of my writing. I could still hear my voice trying to make sense of what it was saying.

MA: Does your work include performances?

SO'R: Yes. Sometimes it's scripted, sometimes improvised around a structure. The research and the writing are important, as I hate performing but I can never get anyone else to do it. It's harrowing. I was doing a performance in Paris recently and I had my voice feeding me my