

Making Access Work: Transcript

[00:00] » **Hannah:**

Hi everyone, thank you so much for joining us today. My name is Hannah Wallis. Sorry. One second. Sorry about that. I was getting multiple feedback of my own voice which was a little bit disorienting. Thank you so much for joining us today. My name is Hannah and I work in the programme team here at Wysing Arts Centre. It's a pleasure to be hosting everyone this afternoon along with my good collaborator Sarah Hayden, who I will hand over to shortly. So just by way of a short description, I am a cis white woman in her early 30s with short wavy brown hair and I'm wearing a dark blue denim shirt and I also wear a cochlear implant on my right ear. Today's event is called 'Making Access Work', and in this conversation we will explore arts access from the perspective of those who translate, interpret, and describe sound and image. So contributors include access workers who specialize in captioning, audio description, and BSL interpreting in art contexts, but also artists who are accessibility activists as well. So by bringing together those who make access their work, we hope to open up this conversation about how arts access might develop going forward. So this event is the first in a series of newly formed the Art of Captioning research group which is a group supported by the British Art Network, the group explores what creative captioning can bring to art whilst also thinking about advancing the vital work of access, equality and inclusivity in the sector Today's event will be about 90 minutes long. We will have a comfort break. The panelists will first present for about 15 minutes each Which will be followed by a ten minute break and the remaining time will be given to an in-conversation and questions which will be chaired by Sarah. We have live

captioning provided today by Jodi from 121 Captioning and I will share a stream text link in the chat in a second if that's preferable. We also have BSL interpretation from Hayley Wiseman and Sue MacLaine who will each take it in turns to interpret throughout the event. I will also be sharing any full names and necessary links in the chat as we go through the session. So we hope that you'll enjoy the event today. We are streaming live so please do bear with us if there are any delays or any mishaps like you've already seen. We suggest reloading the page if you do have any continued connection problems. Otherwise you can send us a message in the chat on Twitch. We do advise that audience members don't share their full name when posting in the chat box just because this will be publicly available throughout the event. We would also like to remind everyone that we host this event in the spirit of mutual respect and that we retain the right to remove any comments that demonstrate offensive or inappropriate behavior. So it's with a huge thanks to the speakers today: Elaine, Natasha and Nina and to Sarah for this continued collaboration. We also have our excellent captioners and interpreters translating the event and also thank you to the Wysing and British Art Network teams for supporting this work. If you would like to learn more about the British Art Network, and the Art of Captioning research group, please do join our mailing list or you can find out more about the project via the Wysing website. We will also be sending out a survey through EventBrite after the event today and any feedback we do really sort of very much take into consideration, so any feedback that you have will be very welcome. So on that note I'll pass over to Sarah.

[04:30] » **Sarah:**

Thank you, Hannah. Hi, everyone. My name is Sarah Hayden, I'm a writer and academic at the University of Southampton where I run an AHRC research project called Voices in the Gallery on the intersection of voice, text and access in contemporary art. I'm a white woman working from home in London today with some plants and flowers behind me. I'll be chairing our discussion later and I'll be the one breaking in over-enthusiastically to ask more questions with an Irish accent but we're really keen for your questions, so please do post those in the chat. I'm aware just as I've started speaking that someone in this block of flats has started some very loud, loud demolition, so I apologise for the background noise behind me. It's only just started. It's just stopped and hopefully that's the end of that. Hannah and I co-lead this British Art Network Art of Captioning research group and in a moment I'm going to introduce our contributors to this, our first event. Elaine and Nina are on screen with us today. Unfortunately Natasha couldn't join us live but she's prepared a wonderful video which we're going to screen for you today and Natasha will be linking back in with the group for future meetings. Just before introducing the first of our speakers, we wanted to give a really brief definition or note or gloss, a reminder of what's going to be very familiar to some but might be less well-trodden ground for others. We're going to be talking today about audio description a practice in which, to use Audio Describer Louise Fryer's very neat definition information received through one sense, vision, is translated into information that can be received through another sense, audition. So in theatre, in film, in dance, in TV, in innumerable other contexts audio description translates the visual aspects of what happens on stage, or screen, or in a space into audible spoken form. When we talk about captioning we mean the translation of sound into into readable words. And importantly whereas intralingual or same-language subtitles would typically translate only

spoken words or dialogue, Captioning, also sometimes referred to as subtitling for the d/Deaf or hard-of-hearing, should encompass description or translation of the whole world of the work. Open captions are permanently viewable on screen or on stage. They're openly available to all. They're permanently there. But closed captions can be switched on and off by the individual user. If we speak about CART or real time captioning Then we're talking about something you might encounter at a talk or a performance. It's produced live by a captioner, a stenographer, or a palimptypist captioning in real time and finally, when we refer to BSL interpretation we're talking about British sign language, an official minority language of the UK. Sign Language, to use British Sign's definition, is: "A visual means of communicating using gestures, facial expression and body language". And importantly, though BSL is the form of sign language used most widely in Britain, Its grammatical structure and its syntax are independent of, and bear little relation to, spoken English. BSL interpretation is then a process of interpretation between a spoken language and a distinct sign language. When it comes to the roles played by each of these practices in access-making and art, what is sought is an equivalence of experience, an equality of access for all involved. Our first speaker, Elaine, is a collaborator with whom I've been lucky enough to work very closely on this year, on a project for LUX as part of voices in the gallery and we'll be sharing details on that with this group later in the summer. Elaine Lillian Joseph is an audio describer for TV, cinema and live shows. She has a BA in modern languages, German, and English Literature and trained as a describer at ITV, under Jonathan Penny. She specializes in experimental films and dance but also loves to provide live description at queer cabaret nights. Over the years she has delivered a number of AD workshops, consultancy advice to clients in

the public and private sector, and I'm delighted to have Elaine here with us today. Elaine, please.

[08:50] » **Elaine:**

Thank you so much, Sarah. Hello. My name is Elaine Lillian Joseph and I am an audio describer from Birmingham. I'm a Black cis woman with long black and purple braids and I'm in my early 30s. I wear thick rimmed glasses and I'm in a purple and red outfit. I'm super grateful to have been asked to talk on this panel and excited to have the opportunity to hear tangible practical manifestos toward the future of access in the arts. To give you a brief overview of my background, I studied English literature and German at University with an emphasis on the audio-visual world. I've always loved cinema and TV in particular and still apply some of the translation techniques I learned from German into English in my audio description practice. After graduating, I settled in access services, first in captioning, then in AD. I really worked on every level of hard-of-hearing captioning. I did the scripting, multiple rounds of quality control, I line managed, I hired subtitlers for hard of hearing, I exported captions for DVD, cinema, broadcast, and streaming platforms, Yet despite being across so many different captioning workshops, I never encountered deaf production assistants or coordinators or indeed subtitlers. Complaints from users were heard after subtitles went live but there wasn't an integrated consultation system prebroadcast. I had strict editorial guidelines to adhere to, subjectivity was discouraged, and I found the whole experience oddly disconnected from the deaf community. I moved into AD, audio description, because I wanted the opportunity to work with voice as well as words and have more creative autonomy over the words I used. I worked part time for ITV where I was lucky enough to be trained by Jonathan Penny Who's a huge

innovator in the industry, and champion of finally bringing in blind people pre and post broadcast into our department. In my own freelance practice, my preference is to always work with a blind consultant before my final script is completed. If possible, a paid forum or panel discussion to give feedback, or if not, at least one blind person to offer their perspective into the nitty-grittys of AD. Most importantly, do the sentences conjure anything useful or have I just got carried away when I should really call a spade a spade. Sadly, this aspect of my practice is often dependent on or limited by budget and time scale. Of course, not all small institutions or individual artists can afford to pay me as the scripiter and voicer and a consultant on top. However, I'm really talking about the big arts institutions who still think of AD as an add-on, or who do not factor in considerate time scale for the amount of labour I have to put in and the time needed to receive feedback and who do not set aside a pot to ensure a high quality of AD. The emergence of live online events during the first lockdown in 2020 was a beautiful surprise to me in the face of arts organisations shutting down over that spring and summer. Suddenly things that disabled people have been crying out for were easily granted. Workarounds were quickly found, the technology was there and ready to be used It feels frustrating then when organisations seemingly return to the less inclusive ways of 2019. Recently a big gallery was unable to play a collaborative AD track during an exhibition because of kit issues. Surely these are basics now that we shouldn't have to fight for. Headphones tested ahead of time, can't we provide more than one session with audio description for a show with a long run rather than one specific Wednesday matinee that barely anyone can attend. Or utilise more prerecorded AD for live events so that every performance is equally accessible. I've encountered shows that include an audio introduction which briefly sets up the stage and cast before all

performances so the experience is the same for all visitors. This returns me to my second point on blind consultants and forums. My ideal way to work is as a conduit between creator and user. Everyone learns from the process as an ongoing collaboration. I love the refraction involved in AD. I translate the visual elements of an artist's vision into an oratory one using words primarily, but also rhythm and tone. And this is then further coloured by the blind consultants' interior world; their biases and preconceptions. Then I relay this back to the artist and work out how to create something which honours everyone, myself included. It should be a chain of constant learning and tweaking, listening and honing. My role as audio describer is to bring my expertise and my sensitivity to the needs and desires of all stakeholders. My goal therefore is to create a project that is living. It doesn't stop at the point of recording or live describing. It exists in multiple forms and formats. It should never be severed from the piece. If a dance show transfers, there should be no need for a new script to be created from scratch or even worse, no AD provided at all. A script can be returned to and reworked. Maybe it needs to be brought up to date because terminology has become inappropriate or there is information missing that is deemed more relevant than before. A big change in the industry in the UK was kick started by a report in 2020 called 'Describing Diversity in AD' led by professor Hannah Thompson, Matthew Cock and Dr Rachel Hutchinson. It was something we had also begun to talk about in my department at ITV and this was accelerated by the whole country becoming away of Black Lives Matter movement. The general standard adopted was to only describe race if necessary especially in theatre and TV. When writing audio description scripts there were only a certain amount of gaps between dialog or a sound effect to set up crucial information like location, appearance of characters, plot pertinent objects. On the list of things that are relevant,

ethnicity and race didn't appear very high and therefore, an unconscious default was assumed that any character on screen or on stage was white unless stated otherwise and other visual elements were often skirted over too. For example, body type or whether a character made use of a wheelchair. Informal chats with other describers revealed that a lot of the reluctance came from fear of using the wrong terminology, fear of misidentifying someone's ethnicity or gender. There is a greater tradition in theatre and dance of including audio introductions which can describe the racial makeup of a company before a performance starts. I've often recommended these to artists to pass on to galleries as a way of including extra information if there's no room in a traditional integrated AD script. Another luxury of working directly with artists means that I can quickly iron out any reservations. Where possible, I send a few questions ahead of scripting asking all performers to provide their preferred pronouns, ethnicity, skin colour and build so I don't have to make assumptions. In a way, that's the first act of collaboration on the road to scripting. The diversity report encouraged me to question what we think of as relevant information, to dismantle the idea of my own objectivity and to challenge assumptions of a default. Audio description should privilege the blind user. It should carry details that strive for more than a comparable experience to a nonblind person. It should be a fully auditory experience, echoing and complementing the sound track, a nuanced feast for the ears. I've had the pleasure of working with artists who have hired me before their film has even been recorded, or their exhibition has been staged. I've been able to liaise with production assistants. talk to cast members about what terminology they feel comfortable with, ask dancers how they think of a certain movement or sequence, give advice to the editors to have pauses between scene transitions so I can describe a chunk of information or set up a key action.

These are dream conditions for any audio describer and they can only give me a better sense of the tone of the work. As I said before, it should be a collaborative process where in this case, everyone has an opportunity to meet me and understand what audio description is. As an access worker, it is always my goal to educate where possible, to advocate for my patrons and ultimately to provide a service that entertains and keeps pushing the boundaries of the art form. I have the duty of care and sensitivity to my patrons and also to any person who I describe within my scripts. Something which I take seriously. The future of diversity and inclusion in AD in the UK for me represents centring users early on in the making stage, making scripts accessible to future describers as training tools and creating a channel of dialog between as many stakeholders as possible so that they in turn can pass on their knowledge about AD in their next project. Thanks for listening.

[19:53] » **Sarah:**

Thanks so much, Elaine, for that rich and provocative manifesto As well as a peek into the world of audio description. I'm going to hold my questions for now and introduce Natasha but I'm really looking forward to talking to you and Nina in a moment. Natasha Transom began her career as a communications support worker, working for a small deaf led charity and supporting deaf students in higher further education. After completing her studies in BSL and qualifying as a registered sign language interpreter in 2009, she became a freelance interpreter working predominantly in mental health services for deaf people. After years of working in mental health services and with a wealth of experience, Natasha decided to go back to her theatre roots, the BA honors in theatre studies and Spanish. Natasha has been working alongside deaf artists, actors, dancers, directors and writers in theatre, dance and TV for several

years, from auditions to R&Ds from rehearsals to film shoots, Natasha loves to be part of the creative process and strongly believes in access to the arts for all. So as I said we're about to stream now Natasha's film, and then we'll be right back to speak to Nina, just a moment.

[21:38] » **Natasha:**

Hi, everybody. My name is Natasha Trantom. I am a registered sign language interpreter. I'm pretty gutted I can't be with you today to be part of the discussion and hear everyone else's input as well. But I have probably just landed in Seville for a much-needed break with my family. But when I was asked if I wanted to contribute and give a sign language interpreter's perspective I thought I couldn't miss this opportunity. It's something I don't want to turn down. I think as interpreters and communicators, the messengers, it's rare we actually get asked to voice our opinions. So I feel really grateful to have been asked to be part of this. A little bit about myself, I have a deaf brother, we're two years apart so we were pretty close growing up and from a very early age I became his communicator and if my brother misunderstood anything or others couldn't understand what he was saying I was the person to interpret. And it isn't until much later on in life when I was training to become an interpreter that I realised that that's what I was doing back then. I was providing access. And I think it's always been at the forefront of my mind even during those formative years. I went on to study Spanish and theatre studies. I left at the ripe old age of 22 with no idea what I wanted to do in life. And it was strange at this point in my life, my brother had been to see a theatre performance with a BSL interpreter. And he described what a wonderful experience it was to have access in his own language rather than have to rely on captions in English which isn't -- was not a language he was

very proficient at. So he would struggle to read captions if it was quite in-depth text. And for me, it was very much the penny-drop moment. I'd always wanted to learn BSL formally rather than the home language that we had with one another and I also loved theatre as I mentioned before, access was already part of who I was. It's just something I did. So I began my journey to become a BSL interpreter. Six years later I graduated in interpreting and became a fully qualified registered sign language interpreter. So yes, six whole years and that was one of the quicker routes to take. As a freelance interpreter, I've worked in the community predominantly mental health services, but it was arts that I found my niche and it's where my passion was. Bearing in mind I'd already done a theatre studies degree, so there was just a nice little connection between the two. Over the last ten years I've worked with a number of deaf artists on a variety of projects as an access provider, TV, film shoots, theatre productions that have been deaf-led or mainstream-led, youth projects, and quite frankly, it's a brilliant job. I love it. I absolutely love it. So thinking about access, making access work for the arts and for me it's like, well, where does it start? Where does access start in this journey to making art? And for me it's the very beginning. Two things to think about is access within production, so I'm talking about a sign language perspective, and when I say productions, I'm talking about rehearsal spaces, and access for audience members, so both are two very different forms of access. I tend to work as a rehearsal room interpreter with deaf actors, deaf directors, producers, writers, and I've worked as I said before in deaf-led theatre but also mainstream theatre. I work primarily in London because -- well, there's a lot of work here and it's close to home. It's where I live. Today I'm going to focus on theatre rehearsal access as this is my preferred domain. With regards to access for audience members, I would recommend Performance Interpreting. I'm hoping Hannah

can post the website maybe in the chat now, that would be great, and also Theatre Sign, another agency which provides support for audience members in the West End, for amazing and fantastic shows but that's kind of their niche and that's what they're really, really good at. So if you want more information about performance interpreting Then I would definitely recommend those two avenues, resources. They've also got a list of experienced performance interpreters and they can also give you advice on for example, positions, where to -- where to be stood on the stage, lighting, tech, and also integrated performance as well. Audio feeds which they may also need. You may -- oh, you may not know that supply and demand is a huge factor in the interpreting world. Basically, there are not enough of us and as I mentioned before, the journey to becoming a qualified interpreter can take 6 to 7, 8 years especially when it comes to a specific domain like I mentioned before, I worked in mental health, there's court interpreting, police interpreting, and of course there's theatre, TV interpreting and they're all very niche. So you have to know the language, the jargon, the terminology for those domains so if you really want to specialize in something then you probably need another couple of extra years to really hone in on that specific domain. I would definitely recommend working with RSLIs, the R means registered and fully qualified with our professional body which is NRCPD, I'm hoping Hannah or Sarah can just post that there. And the professional body means we have insurance, we have a DBS check, we have a code of conduct that we adhere to and each year we have to achieve a certain amount of CPD points to reregister. Please, please, please do not book a theatre crew that can sign, or signers. It's the equivalent of my GCSE French that I did 20 odd years ago which I wasn't very good at. So that is not an avenue of access that deaf people would want. I also want to make a note that there are trainee interpreters working in this domain and my

advice for people who will be booking interpreters to ask where those trainees are in their journey to becoming qualified. Are they just starting out? They've just registered to start doing the training or will they be submitting their portfolio in a month's time and they'll be qualified. So I think it's really really important to just suss out where they are in their journey. What else? They have to achieve the same as RSLIs in terms of registration but they're still training in terms of their qualifications so just be mindful of that when you're booking interpreters. So back to rehearsal room interpreting. I will give you a scenario and this -- this happens time and time again. In fact I just received an e-mail the other day of an organization asking if I'm available for project starting next week for a two week R&D with for example deaf -- three deaf actors and four hearing actors. And it sounds like an amazing project. I know the theatre, I know the deaf actors, I've worked with some of the hearing actors before, but -- and I really want to do the booking, but guess what? The majority of the time I'm not available due to the such short notice of the request. As I mentioned before, supply and demand, there aren't enough of us for the amount of work especially somewhere like London and I understand that things move fast in the theatre world and that is why it's so important to think about access for deaf people in the arts from the very get-go, from the very beginning, not oh, we've got an R&D in two weeks time or next week. So going back to my scenario, the likelihood of finding two interpreters with the right experience to work in a rehearsal room the week before a project starts is near on impossible. And for continuity and consistency, I would advise that you book a team or a pool of interpreters as far advance as you possibly know. When you know those dates, you know you've got a deaf actor, that's when you need to do the callout for interpreters because it's difficult to find interpreters with specific expertise in that domain. And you'll end up perhaps

not having the interpreters that you want. What else? I think also with regards of having a pool of interpreters, so I think -- I've noticed recently lots of companies want the same interpreter to work the whole two weeks, which in theory is a great idea. But actually in practice it just doesn't work. You really need a pool of people. I've just worked on a really big production, in fact, where we just finished rehearsals, we're in the run and there's been about a pool of eight of us working together. And it means we have a what'sapp group, we can update each other -- sorry that's my dog that just really scared me, now he wants to come in so I'm going to have to ignore him, so please ignore that. Sorry. I've lost my train of thought now. So yes, it's really important to have a pool of interpreters. It means, especially with Covid times, things happen and you've got a group of people who can cover one another if needed, can update each other and just work -- we just work nicer as a team and can help one another and it just allows better access in the end for the deaf client. I think also, most importantly, is ask the deaf actors or the creatives if they have a preferred list of interpreters. That is really, really important. That they prefer to work with, because when you are working in a rehearsal space or in a tech for example, the hours can be long, it's quite intense in a dark room so it's really important that the interpreter providing the access has a good rapport with the deaf actor and the rest of the team. If you're struggling to find interpreters, remember that we as interpreters have a network of colleagues and people that we prefer to work with as well that we know, it just runs smoothly. So always ask other interpreters if they can recommend anybody or if they want to work with anybody specific. Which brings me to access budgets. Please don't let this be an afterthought. So think about, right, okay, we want a deaf actor, we need to book the interpreters but also we need to get the budget before, you know, anything starts, really. Don't let it be an

afterthought. And if you want to employ a deaf actor or creative, you need a budget for access to covering interpretive costs. And please also note that interpreters are language professionals and not artists. So our fees should not be deemed the same as artists. And you can check out our union, we've got a national interpreting union, which is NUBSLI, I'm hoping somebody could put that in the chat. And that is great on giving advice on how to work with an interpreter and it has a fee guidance document as well. Many deaf actors and creatives that you work with may be able to apply for access to work funding which will cover interpreting costs. This means the cost is covered by DWP and not the theatre company. However, please note that the application process can take time. So again, these are conversations that you need to have with your deaf actors in the very early stages, for example, during auditions, like can you apply for access to work, do you need support in applying for access to work, have you had access to work before. Those are conversations you need to have at the very beginning. The access to work system is pretty archaic and it takes a lot of admin time for deaf actor. There are now five pages to fill out each time you send an invoice. Bearing in mind that their hearing peers will not have to worry whether their access worker has been paid or not. Deaf actors really worry about their access workers being paid on-time. Because if we don't get paid then perhaps we don't want to work with them because we hate not getting paid, it's just like this vicious circle and it's because the system is really quite archaic and arduous. In my experience, if it is a mainstream theatre company, they can support the deaf actor in this process with regards to applying for access to work which actually allows the deaf actor to focus on their craft and bringing down the house on press night as their hearing peers will do. So we've covered budgets, access to work, how to book interpreters, qualifications, but my question to you is, who is -- who is the access for? For

example, if it's a deaf-led theatre company, all the actors are deaf BSL users and the stage manager is hearing. Then access is for the stage manager. Right? Or not? I don't know. Or another scenario, a mainstream theatre company and everyone is hearing except for the one deaf actor. So you would assume that access is for the deaf person. Well, actually, there tends to be this assumption that access is only for the deaf person, but in fact, it's access for all and for the duration of the project. It's also imperative to remember that not every deaf actor will have the same access needs or same communication needs. So as I mentioned before, these conversations need to be happening before the creative process has even started. So you can have a deaf actor who uses BSL, but likes to speak for themselves, you could have a deaf actor who uses the interpreter to voice them over and uses only BSL to communicate. It really, really varies which is why it's important to have those conversations at the very start. Just so you know you're finding the right interpreters to work with them. And this then brings me to the translation process. For example, a deaf actor performing Shakespeare will need time to translate Shakespeare's English into modern-day English, into BSL and then into performance BSL. We also talk about VV, so visual vernacular, which is a more visual performance-based style of signing. So that is a really long process, and for the deaf actor to really understand the language and to perform at their best, they will probably need minimum two weeks before rehearsal starts so they can actually work on that translation so they go into the rehearsal room really understanding the language. And from my experience, what tends to happen is that the deaf actor is not given the time or the space pre-rehearsals to do that. However, during rehearsals, there's hardly any time for interpreters and the deaf actors to then work on translation. There is time, but you want that to be done so they can really focus on what's happening in the room. And a lot of deaf actors

will benefit from having a BSL consultant whose native language is BSL.

Thinking about the rehearsal room and access, I think it's really important for the crew and the cast to have deaf awareness at the very start and that's specific to deaf awareness within theatre domains or whether that's shoots or film, TV, it's -- I just think it's essential at the start of rehearsals. It just helps clarify any questions that the actors and crew have about working with the deaf creative and it means that everybody can get those questions out of the way, silly questions, whatever, and focus on the project. I think the wonderful thing about actors is they are very open -- actually creatives in general are just very open to learning new things and they learn signs very quickly to make sure that their deaf peers feel a part of the team. And it can just help, you know, allow messages to be like across the theatre space or across the room with the deaf creative or the actor when the interpreter may not be there. And when it works it just makes our job so much easier when there's a rapport between the cast and the crew and people are willing to learn and they want to learn, I'm always having stage managers ask me, what's the sign for this, what's the sign for this? Especially during the pandemic and there's mask wearing which means it's difficult for deaf people to lip read. It actually-- Just learning a little bit of sign that's specific to the play that they're doing really, really helps. And I think my aim whenever I start a production is to, you know -- I think the beginning, the interpreter, the access worker, you're there, but six weeks into rehearsals you kind of can take a step back and just watch people thrive doing what they do best, which is acting and not having to rely so much on the interpreters or us being this massive thing that we're in the room kind of thing. And yes, we are access workers, but we're very much a part of the team. I think sometimes people want to think access is something different to what's happening within the whole creative process but we're very much part

of that. We're humans, we have feelings, and, you know, we're super proud of the clients that we work with. It was literally just last night, myself and the pool of interpreters, we've all been working together supporting a client in a massive production, this fantastic play, and all of us watching him on stage was incredible and it's just like a super special moment and we go to the press night party and we know everybody and we're friends with everyone because everybody knows us and we're part of something. So we're not outsiders. I think that's the most important thing to remember is that we are part of the team. And that's it from me, really. I hope I've covered what I possibly can with regards to a sign language interpreter's perspective. I'm really gutted I can't be there for the actual Q&A.

[44:31] » **Sarah:**

Thanks so much, Natasha. I'm beaming at the screen and realizing that we're also gutted not to have you in the room today and we're beaming our thanks over to Seville and we're really glad to have you involved in the group in the future. In listening and watching to everyone today I'm so aware that there's so much to learn from each of the contributions today, so much that is practical and informative and that can help us to think really differently and in a really vivid way about access and just as Natasha said there, its relationality, how it happens between us, all of the time. But just to point out that there will be a video available afterwards today so re-engaging with all of this content will be possible and we're hoping this will enable people to enact all of this really, really useful advice and to run away with these ideas and these ways of thinking about access and take them into your own work and practice. So I'm delighted now to introduce Nina Thomas. Nina Thomas is a visual artist and an advocate for captioning and improved access to the arts, heritage and film for

deaf and hard of hearing people. In her art practice she often foregrounds stories and histories that might be overlooked or underexplored. Much of her recent work has focused on her experience of becoming deaf and her subsequently seeking to understand other deaf experiences and deaf history. She has exhibited at venues such as the Crypt Gallery NW1, LUX Online and Ovada, Oxford. She's a founding member of The Film Bunch where she curated the online screening Deaf Experience and she was commissioned by Pan Macmillan to create an animation for the poet Raymond Andtobus. She has worked on access and advised on projects for the V&A, the Wallace Collection, NDACA, British Ceramics Biennial, the British Museum, Shape Arts and D4D, and she is also a trustee at Stage Text. Once Nina has presented we're going to take a ten minute screen break and then we'll meet you back here just ten minutes later. Nina, please, thank you.

[46:50] » **Nina:**

Thank you. So my name is Nina Thomas, I'm a white woman, brown hair, and I'm wearing a navy striped top today and there's a blue background behind me. I'm profoundly deaf. I wear a cochlear implant and as I've sort of already said I'm an artist, founding member of the Film Bunch, and I'm also on the board of Stage Text, who are a live subtitling, captioning-- who provide live subtitling captioning for the arts and heritage sector. So to explain a bit about me, I'm originally from Staffordshire but I currently live in London I was born with no hearing in my right ear and I attended mainstream school. So I never really thought about myself as deaf or hard of hearing. I was able to access most of the same places that my hearing peers could. And it was only after I graduated from a visual arts degree that I experienced a sudden hearing loss in my left ear and everything changed. At the time I was living in Derby and overnight I

found myself cut off from so many of the things I once enjoyed. So I could no longer go to the cinema without first checking if there was a subtitled showing. And often there were none, and if there was it was a time that wasn't practical for me or my friends to attend. TV shows I once enjoyed often weren't subtitled. Exhibitions would be inaccessible as there would be films that weren't captioned or soundworks that weren't captioned or didn't have transcripts. So when I moved to London to study for my MA, I genuinely believed things would be different because of the variety on offer, and also assuming that the budgets would be larger compared to the smaller regional venues. I was surprised to discover that London was just as inaccessible to me even though these events or venues often claimed to be fully accessible. Sometimes for example a venue would say they were deaf accessible. I'd e-mail to check and they'd say there was a hearing loop. I'd then book a ticket and arrive early at the venue to ensure that they knew I was there so that we could check the loop and the loop was switched on. But all too frequently I'd be assured everything was fine, only to find out once I was sat down, and there was no one around to help, that it wasn't working and I'd be stuck in a room full of people all listening and engaging in conversation while I was unable to hear a word. This was obviously a very isolating and upsetting experience so in the end I found myself avoiding most events unless they were captioned. As this was the most reliable way to ensure that my access needs were met. I also found many London museums and art galleries were inaccessible to me. Often it was the larger venues that seemed to be most inaccessible. It might be that an appreciation of an exhibit relied on hearing a sound that wasn't described or a film without subtitles, or encounters with staff who weren't deaf aware. I felt frustrated and I experienced significant isolation. My frustration led me to get involved in various projects that aimed to improve access into the arts and

heritage sector. I also started blogging and tweeting about my experiences both positive and negative to encourage change. I then became a member of The Film Bunch. So at The Film Bunch, we created events that were accessible for deaf and hard of hearing people where hearing people were also welcome. We regularly hosted short film screenings where there was an opportunity to network. All our events had to have BSL interpretation and all the films we screened had to be captioned. So to explain a bit about my involvement with The Film Bunch and how it started, after I graduated from my MA I chose to stay in London but as I've said, I found many of the opportunities to network and progress in my career were all inaccessible. So around this time I met Shaz Begum and we had the idea for The Film -- who had already had the idea for The Film Bunch and we shared the experiences of graduating and finding we couldn't access the events we wanted to attend. So we would -- we decided we would create our own accessible events and make sure that they had BSL and that all the films were subtitled. If a film wasn't accessible to us we wouldn't screen it. We saw this as an opportunity to get the message out there and to encourage short film makers to think about access when they were making their films and submitting them to festivals and screenings. Alongside this we also were keen to highlight the benefits to short films of making their films accessible, such as improved search engine optimisation which obviously increases the reach of the film. Also making it accessible to non-native English speakers, a lot of the people who were attending our events were -- English wasn't necessarily their first language and they also appreciated having subtitled events. We also welcomed non-English speaking films which had been captioned for deaf and hard of hearing people. We explained to film makers how captions on promos, clips and trailers on social media might be watched by a hearing audience without sound as they were watching on their

phone. We were always keen to explain how captioning could help a film reach a wider audience. However, even as we made clear that -- what we were about, and the films, we would still get films submitted to us which weren't captioned. Often I'd sit down to watch a film and I'd find that what had been submitted hadn't been captioned at all. Or the filmmaker had only subtitled the dialogue and had forgotten how important the sounds that might not be heard by a deaf audience were to the plot. For example, one film had a scene where knowing somebody was knocking at the door was crucial to the plot and the sound hadn't been captioned at all. Other examples were filmmakers not thinking about the overall sound design and how important it was to the film. Similarly -- simply writing for example 'music plays', but nothing more than that, it didn't give an indication of what the music was or why that music had been chosen. Similarly, nuances in speech weren't picked up, or accents, or even important silences. So many important sounds or the absence of sound weren't conveyed to their deaf audience. Watching so many films raised questions for me about the information captions can provide or should provide. How film makers could think about this at the conceptual stage of development. Also, could captions add another layer of interpretation to a film. When I spoke with emerging film makers, it was often the case they simply hadn't thought about accessibility or captioning when they were making their film. Having this issue highlighted to them helped them think about their film, and their script, from a different angle. It improved their work and they were really receptive to making all their films accessible. We also spoke to university students too, who were just getting started. We wanted to get the message out there and change the industry. What Shaz and I wanted to do was create high quality events that were accessible to both deaf and hearing people. We wanted to create a space where people could meet, work

together, network, and start new short film projects all while thinking about accessibility and inclusion more broadly. We also wanted to make sure we shared films by deaf filmmakers, and promoted deaf-led projects. There's a great opportunity for deaf and hearing film makers to come together and make work together. Although Shaz and I are both deaf, we both have grown up in a hearing world and we often felt isolated within it. What we wanted to do is to bring deaf and hearing people together in a welcoming and inclusive space. I don't think we could have done that without having some great hearing people as members of The Film Bunch who were allies and understood the concept and wanted to create an inclusive space to meet. Over the years, we hosted many events, talks, workshops and then when the pandemic hit we started to think what we could do to continue our work so we created online screenings. I curated an event bringing together deaf film makers, poets and artists, which explored deaf experience. I wanted to highlight how there are many different deaf experiences and the diverse experience of deaf and hard of hearing people. I felt that it is important to do this as deaf people were experiencing significant isolation during this time and often access still wasn't being thought about or if it was accessible, they probably only thought about one form of access, BSL or captioning and not both. I wanted to increase the representation of all deaf people. During -- as I said -- during the pandemic and lockdowns, venues and organisations suddenly decided to think about getting their work out online. All of a sudden, this led them to think about how they could be more accessible to a wider audience and increase interest -- and increased an interest and demand for captioning. But I wonder whether this was also an increased -- there was also an increased sense of empathy during lockdowns: we all experienced, in some ways, what it's like to be isolated and cut off and to not have access to things we once took for granted. I'd like to think we all

understood a little what deaf and disabled people have experienced for years and therefore felt the need to change our working practices to be more inclusive. Also, perhaps wider conversations about inclusion meant organisations started to think 'How inclusive are we?' Whatever the reason for an increased interest in access work and captioning it was great to see this shift start to happen after years of fighting for this access. But there are a few issues that concerned me at this time and have since. I think it's important to consult the experts, those who are deaf themselves, and the reason for this are perhaps obvious. But the way to ensure that access works is to engage with those who use it. Ask them what works and what doesn't. Make sure they're involved at all stages. So many deaf people -- so many people want to reach a deaf audience but forget to engage with that audience first and make sure that what they are providing is what best serves them. And then also about AI captioning. So a lot of events when they went online started using AI captions rather than human captioners. It's -- if you are using AI captions, it's important to tell people what you're providing, and that it will be AI captions. If you're using AI captions be aware this is not a replacement for human captioning. AI captions are not the same as a human captioner who has years of training, are highly skilled and they can best provide access that best serves the audience. They're able to identify who's speaking, different accents, tone of voice and external sounds and will accurately caption things that AI will certainly miss that are crucial to understanding meaning. Anyone who's seen AI captions will have seen those garbled sentences, and strange and often funny miscommunications that can happen. So if you're providing AI be aware that this is not the best access for deaf and hard of hearing people. Make it clear on your events what's on offer, and also if it's captions for film please don't rely on AI captions. I would budget for human captioners and subtitles if possible

and get recommendations from deaf and deaf led charities like StageText who are best placed to advise and can make sure you are providing access that works for the intended audience. As I say, palimptypists, captioners and subtitlers are highly skilled just like BSL interpretation. subtitling and captioning is provided at different levels of quality depending on experience, area of expertise and skill. It's important to know who you're booking and if they are the best person for your film or event so do get recommendations and consult the experts. So also what concerned me was what happens now we return to in-person events? Is this a long-term change or will it now be business as usual? So what worries me now is whether it is back to business as usual now we've returned to in-person events. What about films and audio works and existing collections? What about in-person talks and events? Still too many events are inaccessible. I'm also concerned about the use of access as a gimmick or promo and not fully integrating it into programmed events and exhibitions long-term. For example, during deaf awareness week cinemas advertised an increase in screenings that week but only for that week and then they were going to return to normal after showing subtitled films at times most people can't attend. But quite rightly deaf people said what about the rest of the year? It's not okay to use access as promo and then forget about deaf people the rest of the year. As I mentioned previously, we need to start thinking about access at the early stages of planning events or creating work. If we do it then we can include it in funding applications and budgets. It also means we can work directly with access workers to make sure that we provide the best quality access and consult a deaf audience. It gives us time too to think how it can add to our work or how we might use captioning creatively. So as an artist I'm interested in how we can think about captioning creatively, what does it mean to read sound? How do we read sound? How do we read

silences? Can sound be a feeling? How do we all experience sound differently? I'm currently working on a project called Captioning Lewisham, which will explore the hidden or overlooked history of Lewisham, in particular Deptford. I have researched the social history of the area and I'll be turning these stories into sound captions in public space. Within my practice I'm interested in what is missing or what's overlooked or underexplored, so I use captioning within my practice to explore these concerns the silences, the silence, the unseen, invisible and often overlooked making experiences and history visible. I see my art practice as an extension of my access work too to encourage change and improve representation. I want to think how we can push the boundaries of what captioning is, creatively and conceptually and think how access work might be thought of as a creative act itself. But most importantly I want encourage everyone to think about access at the conceptual stage or development of their project, film, art work, play, rather than simply as an add-on element. Thank you.

[01:02:23] » **Sarah:**

Thank you so much, Nina. That was absolutely wonderful. We're going to take that ten minute break now and then we'll be back for questions right after the break. See you in a moment.

[01:02:38] » **Sarah:**

Hi, everyone, welcome back from that welcome screen break. It's lovely to have all of our speakers but Natasha on screen now and we have one first question that's come in via the chat on Twitch. The question is asking, "can we comment on how captioning can benefit other audiences "such as neurodivergent audiences "and of course audiences too that might not have

English as a first language "or many other reasons that captioning is a benefit to all." Elaine or Nina, would you like to say a little about this broader audience?

[01:03:25] » **Nina:** Yeah, I mean, I'm happy to speak about it. I'm neurodivergent myself so I kind of find captioning useful for both reasons. Just to be able to check back or something you might not have understood. And I know a lot of other people who express the same views that captioning helps for those reasons. And The Film Bunch, we often had people say that as well. And as I mentioned in my talk as well, people who for English wasn't necessarily their first language it allows them to check back. So there's a really wide audience in terms of who benefits from captioning. It's not just deaf and hard of hearing people.

[01:04:15] » **Elaine:**

Yeah, I completely agree and I just wanted to add that your talk, Nina, actually made me think of this. That culturally, hearing audiences in the UK don't interact that much with captions compared to other like foreign countries basically. So for example, like when I lived in Germany, there's more of an intake of like foreign shows that have been captioned, also dubbed, but also captioned. And it did make me think why is it still the case that you would go to a cinema in central London and only have subtitled, you know, like captioned screenings for like very specific events, and it's kind of the same in the audio description world as well, that only certain ones are described. So why is it that culturally we can't just do it, kind of like access for all, why can't we all just have -- yeah, have the captions there. So it feels like there needs to be also a cultural shift which maybe kind of started due to the pandemic and

more institutions understanding that they needed to be more accessible for a wide range of reasons, as you said.

[01:05:31] » **Sarah:**

Thanks to you both. It does seem like there's just no excuse, right? There's no possible reason that we don't just have open captions on everything anymore. I can't -- I can't see any -- any excuse. Okay. So we've got two more questions in the chat. With one in from Annie saying "Thank you so much for today. "I'm interested in creative captioning "and how captions can be an integrated part of moving image artworks," This is something that interests all of us involved in this event today, "I've done some of this in my own films "as well as supporting this as a practice in my role at LUX Scotland. "I'd love to hear more about your thoughts on the potential of captioning as a creative act." And hi to Annie, it's good to know you're there. So Elaine and Nina, would you like to speak a little bit about creative captioning maybe from each of your perspectives?

[01:06:33] » **Elaine:**

I'm just having a think [laughs].

[01:06:36] » **Sarah:**

We can definitely take time to have a think. It feels like at least one of the benefits of people beginning to think a little bit more broadly about access is that there is a different way of handling time and a different way of thinking about how we can make events actually work for people or try to do that. So take all the time for having a think. Sure.

[01:07:06] » **Nina:**

Yeah, no, I was thinking as well about how you were saying about kind of rhythm and tone and the kind of poetry involved in audio description. In terms of creative captioning I'm really excited to see what creative captioning can learn from audio description as well, in terms of how we can kind of push things because a lot of what's been happening in audio description has been really exciting for a number of years, I think, and we're sort of just starting -- some people are just starting to explore what creative captioning can do and the potential of it and so it overlaps as well with things like poetry, And how we can kind of think about the sounds that we kind of -- hearing people might take for granted how we describe that to a deaf audience. It's kind of really interesting.

[01:07:54] » **Elaine:**

Yeah, and I guess also related to that, you know, kind of other than the words is -- like the format, and when I worked in -- so I do a tiny bit of creative captioning on the side but really not very much anymore but when I was actually working on captions it was more for really, really big streaming platforms and they had their guidelines, basically. So it was interesting to hear about the kind of nuances that you wanted as a user that were definitely not within -- [laughs] You know, things like absence of sound. Even doing creative things with the text and the positioning and things like that, yeah, just thinking about how you can echo your content in the way that you integrate your subtitles, but obviously still making it accessible.

[01:08:52] » **Sarah:**

It does feel as though for lots of audiences when they first encounter some of those artists who are working most excitingly in creative captioning that it

enables them to see suddenly how for hearing and deaf audiences the kind of access to sound that's made possible through that kind of translation is only ever an enriching and expanding and, kind of, increasing of the work and is a kind of a thickening in a way that seems just endlessly exciting to explore further. We've got a comment saying "I'd like to say thanks to the panel "for raising so many important issues. "As an independent curator/producer in gallery or museum settings "I find it so frustrating to be brought onto projects "where even basic access hasn't been given the time, thought "and importantly the budget, as we've discussed To produce the events, exhibitions, etc. with the intentional authentic access commitments that I want to honor." And that's a really important point. We're going to just switch interpreters now. So if Nina and Elaine, if you'd like to give that question a think or see whether you have any comment in response, we'll switch interpreters and then be back in just a second. Thanks, Hayley. So I suppose this kind of question -- or this comment echos a lot of what everyone has been saying today, the sense that access really needs to be thought about before the project begins. It needs to be integrated into the very -- into the first moment where you think about what you might like to make, what you might like to put on and then it just doesn't work, you know, the access isn't going to work, if it's something that's tagged on at the end. Would either of you like to say anything about what that really requires in terms of that planning to sort of -- to set things up, to put things in place at the beginning or how do those conversations need to happen? Because I'm sure both of you have there at that point where someone calls you in too late and you're trying to find the hasty way to make something a bit more accessible, but it's never going to really be possible. Do you have any thoughts on that issue?

[01:11:35] » **Nina:**

Yeah, I think it needs to be thought of at the stage of actually planning your event and your funding application. Because often when it's thought of at the last minute, if you're kind of -- for example, at Stage Text, if they're suddenly getting a last minute request or something it's probably not possible that they're going to be able to provide it so getting all that detail really early on and inquiring about dates even and times, when you're even thinking about the early stages of the funding, so that you've got an idea of availability. I think BSL interpreters would probably say the same thing. But it's generally kind of, like you said, the last minute panic that's the problem when you're trying to add it as an add-on I would say.

[01:12:31] » **Elaine:**

It's also really sad, it feels heartbreaking to have to say no especially if a project is really great like Natasha said. And I think it also, kind of, on the chances when you do say yes to something really last minute, I think it sets a bad precedent as well that it's possible to do these things within kind of crazy time scales and, you know, obviously it's also a job and like an income, so sometimes you are tempted to be like "well, I guess I will just have to churn this out", but the absolute ideal kind of setup for me is when I'm brought in even before the project has kind of been created so then I get a sense I'm part of those conversations or at least even just an e-mail setting out what the intentions are and then I can start to think in my head before I've even seen the video like yeah, what kind of tone or intentions are going into this project. Yeah. I think that's -- and that obviously takes time. And like I said, you know, it's always good to be able to work with a consultant and bring them in, which also takes time and then implementing their feedback and like Natasha said we

should be seen as part of the team rather than this kind of external thing. I had a really nice project a couple months ago where I was introduced to the cast of the film which has never ever happened and they had so many questions. They were so excited to be described as well and understand how that works. And yeah, so I think that's the best case because then everybody learns about the process rather than this random audio describer who comes in right at the end.

[01:14:33] » **Sarah:**

I think that, you know, having -- I think Hannah and I across the last year, you know, having had lots of conversations with artists who are collaborating with captioners and with audio describers, with BSL interpreters for the first time, it's so striking how often for all artists who have that opportunity or who are kind of given that space or who can take that opportunity, that for everybody it produces a kind of -- a really exhilarating change in their practice and expansion in how they think about what they do and a sort of enriching of their own experience of their process. So it pushes the work forward in so many ways that it feels like something that if organizations and curators can try to do that at the -- at that kind of back end of planning and the budgeting and making those arrangements in advance it's going to have enormous benefits for access and it's also going to have huge and lasting benefits for the development of those art practices, that this isn't the kind of -- this isn't just about something happening on one side and it's about who's going to be making art, who's going to be involved in that world and who's going to engage with it and how -- And so it just -- it's really wonderful to have all of you speak about what that work involves and to give people a little insight into what access work is and how we can -- we can make it work and make it work for

everyone: for those who were working in access and for those who engage in whatever way. So I feel like there are loads more questions that we could ask but we are going to hold those, shelve them, And keep them for the ongoing events in this series which is just beginning. The research group has been launched just now, and Hannah and I are going to be working with everyone who gets in touch and joins up across this next year and with the generous support of the British Art Network for which we're really grateful. For today, we want to thank together Nina and Elaine and Natasha, for those really wonderful and stirring and exciting and also practical and pragmatic interventions that I think will be so useful to everyone who's gathered here today and to everyone who engages in this afterwards, we want to thank Chloe and all at Wysing. Since I'm doing the sign off I want to thank Hannah who remains the world's most wonderful collaborator in all things. We want to thank our BSL interpreters Sue MacLaine and Hayley Wiseman and Jodi, our captioner. And we want to thank everyone for joining us today. Do sign up to our mailing list if you'd like to keep abreast of what we're planning and if you have a moment to give us your feedback there will be a form going out via eventbrite in the next couple of days and we'd be so glad to have your input on that as we're planning for the future and what will happen next. Thanks for joining us. Good-bye.