

1980S – GILL CRAWSHAW

Ok...this is Gill Crawshaw recording a story for 'The PIP Tapes'. My starting point for this tale is a photograph of me in 1984 knitting in a squat in Leeds. I chose this image because it brings together a few themes that relate to the PIP Tapes project: activism, disability benefits, music on cassette, the disabled people's movement and an extra element is textiles, textile design and knitting which is part of my story.

This piece is accompanied by a knitted rectangle, about the size of a cassette, which I've knitted from an unspooled cassette tape. I'm going to try and tell this story according to these themes or strands. But, like knitting, they are looped together...they cross over and at times it's hard to tell which strand is which. They don't just run in a linear chronological order because they are closely knitted, or even woven, together. It's impossible to avoid the textile metaphors as I tell this story...maybe I should call it a yarn actually! So...I shall cast on with the first strand.

Strand one: knitting in a squat. I'm looking at a rare photo of me from the 1980s, a time when few photographs were taken, unlike now. I'm on the left of the photo sitting at a table which holds a grey canvas army bag and a large spool of beige yarn which I'm knitting up. I'm looking off to the right of the photo to the back end of a dog and someone's booted leg. Judging by the light of the photo, there would have been a window off to the right, its daytime.

The room is scruffy with bare floorboards. The wall behind me is wood paneled with a strip door in the middle. A hand painted poster for the band 'Lenny's Kitchen' with a smiley face covers the top half of the door. Another gig poster is taped to the wall above my head. The headline band is 'Conflict'. I'm wearing mainly grey and black so my fluorescent green socks and orange canvas shoes are very noticeable below cropped leggings. I've got closely cropped hair, apart from a bright orange tuft at the crown of my head. [Pause]

This was a couple of years after I had left university where I had done textile design. I'd become disabled at university so my life changed in lots of ways. For one thing, nobody seemed to expect me to get a job after I'd graduated. Well that suited me. I didn't want a job in the textile industry and I was happy hanging out with other young people who were also on benefits. It was a mix of anarchists, punks, students, squatters, housing co-ops and musicians. It was my first proper immersion in a community that was bound together by politics and activism...and it was creative, supportive, idealistic and very busy. We might have been on benefits, but this was such a creative and productive time for many people and I look back on it very fondly, actually.

People squatted because they needed places to live and they also squatted to open up empty buildings as community spaces. Large empty buildings became spaces for gigs, art spaces, creches and meetings and the photo was taken in one of these. It was about bringing buildings back into use...self organisation, community development, highlighting how landlords, and in this case local authorities, wasted resources whilst withholding them from people at the same time. Music was at the heart of this anarchist punk scene, of course. And there was so many bands. DIY political bands with anti-war, anti-corporate-bullshit,

animal rights lyrics, even though you couldn't always tell what they were singing. Cassettes were the lifeblood of this movement.

It meant that bands could easily record and distribute their music. Gigs would often be recorded too...and the cassette cover would be a multi-folded sheet of paper absolutely covered with dense writing which might include those lyrics. Strand two: looking for radical crips. Just about everyone I knew at the time was on benefits, as was I, and my benefits included mobility allowance which was vital, it meant I could run a car.

There were checks on people from time to time to make sure we weren't 'cheating the system' but nothing as stringent as people face today. In my case, a disability resettlement officer, who was supposed to support disabled people to get a job, told me that I might as well just wait and get married, so that my husband would support me and not worry about working. Nevermind that I just got a degree...talk about low expectations! I didn't really know any other disabled people though. The anarcho-vegan punks were great but disability wasn't something that came up much. There was more understanding amongst women in the anarcho-feminist movement but it took several years for me to find any radical disabled people.

I tried going to meetings at the local access community and joining support groups but they were more concerned with engaging with the local authority or with maintaining good health. Now of course these were important, there's absolutely a place for those. But it wasn't what I was looking for. It didn't feel at all revolutionary. In the end, disability arts was my route into the disabled people's movement. I did some freelance work for a local community arts organisation and the manager there told me about 'Invalid?', that's got a question mark at the end, a disability arts organisation in nearby Bradford.

It was here that I learnt about the social model of disability, which was a revelation. It honestly changed my life. To realise that disability is created by society, it isn't about individual failings. Understanding that the problems of disability were not my fault, they didn't lie within me but externally, immediately made sense to me. I got involved with 'Invalid?'...it later became 'Valid?', the wider disability arts and disabled people's movement, met many amazing disabled people and, as they say, the rest is history, as I went on to be involved in the movement for many years.

Strand three: benefits are essential. If I hadn't had benefits at that period, and for a while beyond that, I really don't know what I would have done. I would have likely lost my independence, although I didn't really have a family in a position to help. This was a period of mass unemployment, yet the narrative of scroungers was prevalent then. There were so few jobs for people, especially for young people, beyond special schemes, youth programmes. As now, the amount of money that people received on benefits was tiny. Having a community of peers in the same boat certainly made it easier to survive but it was a struggle and many people had it much worse.

We never took benefits for granted, there was the constant threat of the money being taken away. In shared houses, the DHSS, the Department of Health and Social Security, which predates the DWP, would try and prove that people were

cohabiting, so that they could try and cut two people's benefits to one. Then, as now, benefits were an essential part of people's lives. They mean, or should mean, that disabled people can live above the poverty line, independently and with dignity. As we know, that is too often not the case.

Strand four: knitting it altogether. I don't know what I was knitting in that photograph. I knitted several jumpers for friends, including a green Riddler jumper covered in question marks, like the character in Batman, and multicoloured jumpers left over from lots of little lengths of leftover yarn. I'd knit mohair jumpers for pin money, which were then sold in shops for a lot more. I'd carry my knitting around, it's something that you can do while you're chatting...or during meetings. Textiles have been a constant thread, if you like, in my life. From doing textile design at uni...I ran textile workshops as a community artist and made banners with groups at 'Valid?'.

Fast forward to a few years ago, when I curated a project called 'Shoddy', which centred on an exhibition of textile based work by disabled artists. Shoddy is originally the name of new cloth created from woolen waste and recycled fabric. The original meaning is, well now, largely forgotten and the word has gone to mean 'of inferior quality', shabby or broken down. This was the starting point for the exhibition which challenged assumptions that disabled people's work, and ourselves, are inferior, broken down, second rate or badly made.

And of course, the exhibition took place against the ongoing background of austerity, of cuts to the welfare benefits and public services, including social care services, that are disproportionately affecting disabled people and a climate of demonising those who receive benefits or other support. Shoddy, should instead be used to describe the government's treatment of disabled people...although it's nowhere near a strong enough word. I only returned to disability arts a few years ago and I'm trying to use the arts as a form of activism. Art can be a force for change and that's why this project, 'The PIP Tapes', is so important. [Pause].

A PHOTOGRAPH – CALUM PERRIN

[Music playing, tape rewinding, music continuing to play, tape rewinds again]. I'm looking at a rare photo of me from the 1980s. [Music playing, tape rewinds]. I'm on the left of the photo sitting at a table. [Music playing, tape rewinds]. I'm looking off to the right of the photo towards the back end of a dog. [Music playing, water running, tape rewinds].

Judging by the light of the photo, there would have been a window off to the right, its daytime. [Music playing, continues in the background]. I'm looking at a rare photo of me from the 1980s. [Music continues to play, tape rewinds]. The room is scruffy with bare floorboards. [Music continues to play, tape rewinds]. The wall behind me is wood paneled with a strip door in the middle.

[Music continues to play, tape rewinds]. A hand painted poster for the band 'Lenny's Kitchen' with a smiley face covers the top half of the door. [Music continues to play, tape rewinds]. I'm looking at a rare photo of me from the 1980s. [Music continues to play, tape rewinds]. A time when few photographers were taken, unlike now. [Music continues to play, tape rewinds].

I'm looking off to the right of the photo to the back end of a dog and someone's booted leg. [Music continues to play, tape rewinds]. I'm on the left of the photo sitting at a table which holds a grey canvas army bag and a large spool of beige yarn. [Music continues to play, tape rewinds].

I'm looking at a rare photo of me from the 1980s. [Music continues to play, tape rewinds]. The back end of a dog. [Music continues]. And someone's booted leg. [Music continues to play, tape rewinds]. I've got closely cropped hair. [Music continues to play]. Apart from a bright orange tuft at the crown of my head. [Music continues to play, tape rewinds]. [Music crescendos]. [Music gets quieter, continues in the background].

I'd become disabled at university, so my life changed in lots of ways. For one thing, nobody seemed to expect me to get a job after I had graduated. Well that suited me. I didn't want a job in the textile industry and I was happy hanging out with other young people who were also on benefits. [Music continues, quietly].

I'm looking at a rare photo of me from the 1980s. [Music continues, quietly]. A time when few photographs were taken, unlike now. [Music continues, quietly].