AUTISTIC JOY

HESTER REEVE AND VICTORIA GRAY IN CONVERSATION

Keywords

art, philosophy, neurodivergence, flourishing, objects, materiality, peril, quest, friendship with the world, David Bohm, Heidegger, artist-philosopher, carnal, aliveness, masking/unmasking, culture, aesthetics

Summary

In this interview, we explore the intimate relationship between art and philosophy, especially as they relate to lived experience, creative practice, and neurodivergence. With an emphasis on the carnal, lived dimension of philosophy and art, the conversation touches on the limitations of cultural expectations, the need for adventure and risk ("peril") in art, and the difficulty of communicating meaning that transcends standard frameworks of value and knowledge.

Drawing on thinkers like Heidegger and David Bohm, we explore our unique sensitivity to objects, atmospheres, and non-human agency, as well as the necessity of "experimenting with oneself" and maintaining a friendship with the wider cosmos.

Takeaways

- Art and philosophy can form a vital, lived partnership that goes beyond academic study, informing how we perceive, create, and exist.
- Neurodivergence and “autistic joy” are described not through diagnosis, but as an experiential mode of being marked by deep connection to objects, atmospheres, and creative practices.
- The “quest” or “peril” in art and life involves remaining open to risk, adventure, and the unknown, rather than seeking certainty or external validation.
- There are tensions between personal modes of flourishing and societal or cultural expectations, particularly regarding how art should communicate or possess value.
- The interview encourages experimenting with oneself, cultivating “friendship” with the world, and recognizing the importance of seeds—small acts, gestures, or objects that carry generative potential for others.

Bio

Hester Reeve is an artist whose practice encompasses live art, drawing, sculpture, poetry and physicist David Bohm’s 'Dialogue' (a counter-cultural form of insight generation that engages the brain-body at various levels of attention within a group setting).

Venues hosting public works include former Randolph Street Gallery Chicago, LIVE Biennale Vancouver, BONE Performance Festival Switzerland, Tate Britain (under the umbrella of The Emily Davison Lodge), Philosophy on Stage at Halle G Vienna, Yorkshire Sculpture Park, Nirox Sculpture Park South Africa and, most recently, Flat Time House London (as part of the group /origin\forward/slash\ and in association with The Centre for Philosophy and Art, Kings College).

The first monograph of her work, *Ymedaca*, was published by Yorkshire Sculpture Park in 2015. Hester Reeve is Reader in Fine Art at Sheffield Hallam University UK and, linked to the ideas of David Bohm, a founding member of the Pari Centre’s experimental ‘Holoflux’ group led by Lee Nichol.

Interview

Victoria Gray: Hester, I'm really happy to be talking with you today, this afternoon, half past two on a Friday. We're probably both very tired, and I really appreciate all the conversations that we've had leading up to now, both in terms of our Zoom chats, but also in emails.

I think our paths have crossed a few times over the years. And I've always felt a really strong recognition and curiosity about you and your practice. I think the closest encounter we had was the project 'Gesture, Pause, Proximity', which was during Covid, and it was curated by Marianne Holm-Hansen and Orlagh Woods.

Whilst we were both involved in the project, we weren't actually grouped into the same conversations, so we never actually talked. But I did watch your conversation with real interest, and it's since Covid that I've been wanting to chat.

I'm really happy that we're here today. So, just a quick check in. How are you feeling before we start to talk? Any disclaimers?

Hester Reeve: Um, well, it feels very good to be in a space thinking and talking with you. Um, my head is a bit fuzzy, so, you know, it is that thing of, let's see where we go and where we go together.

Thank you so much for even being a centimetre interested in this, both fantastic life that I have, that seems to be the life also of an idiot, which I say with a lot of joy.

VG: And we might come on to that actually, in terms of some of the concepts and thought objects that you fizz around in your practice. But I was thinking we could start with something easy!

I obviously went down the rabbit hole and did lots of research, and I watched the interview with Sasha Goleb at the Centre for Philosophy and Art at King's College London. And you were an artist in residence, is that right? You had this conversation about the relationship between art and

philosophy, and you said something really decisive that I really appreciated, and was really impressed.

You said, "*I couldn't do what I do without philosophy*," and I really resonated with this. I guess I found myself making some assumptions about why you couldn't do what you do without philosophy, based on my approaches to philosophy and art. But I want to ask you that question: "What is the thing that you do that you couldn't do without philosophy?"

HR: Again, this is going to sound grandiose, and I don't mean to be grandiose, but I really feel, for me, I feel human beings, we're really thinking-feeling creatures. And I suppose I look back, and I think, gosh, I think I became an artist from an early age.

Of course, I loved art, I loved making, but actually, it was about making sure I flourished in a certain kind of attention or dimension. It wasn't conscious. But as I get older, and through the help of philosophy - because I'm not a philosopher, that's quite important - the more I read, the more I completely say I can't do what I do without philosophy. I also, ironically, know that I don't want to be a philosopher.

VG: Why don't you want to be a philosopher? I think that's really interesting because I've always been intimidated by the word. When I've engaged with philosophers proper, if you like, people who are, you know, versed in the kind of historical lineages, I've always felt quite inferior. So, I think I've probably always wanted to be a philosopher.

HR: Well, when I first started reading philosophy, when I studied it at Master's - which I wasn't doing to become a philosopher, that's different - I was surprised. I was completely shocked by how at home I felt among philosophers; it was a very special department. I studied in the Philosophy of Nature at Lancaster, with a very special bunch of people from all diverse backgrounds doing master's and PhD level. So, I was very fortunate to land and unfurl with those people.

And to begin with, I think I thought I did want to be a philosopher, or at least a lot of my early work with philosophy was about trying to recognise the fact that few philosophers have articulately argued for the artist-philosopher; a philosopher who might realise their thinking through a more artistic operation.

Which is not to say making art per se. You know, I was kind of interested in, well, maybe then I'm a philosopher-artist; an artist who realises things through sort of philosophical means. And maybe that still stands, I don't know.

Figure 1: Philosopher-Artist [courtesy of the artist]

As I feel I get more deeply enmeshed in certain types - and it is only certain types of philosophical thinking, a kind of experiential thinking rather than information and arguments - I just realised that I love being the person who comes to meet that, and gets reconfigured through that process.

And I realise I can do that. I'm doing something very similar, but it's more carnal and non-verbal, for all my appreciation of poetry. But then I think poetry, as I understand it, is not wordsmithing. I mean, you have to wordsmith with the words, but all of it is trying to push through - whether it's art, poetry, or philosophy – to kind of get into this flourishing state of presence. That can sound quite selfish, but I don't just mean, "to be the best version of myself." I really mean to be present and alive. And so often I don't feel that.

Sasha Golob is very open, a very professional philosopher and very open to discussing with me as an artist-thinker. There's a different part of me that also feels like there are restrictions within philosophy, too, just like I think there are restrictions in art. He (Sasha) once said to me in a discussion, "You seem to put at peril both art and philosophy." And I was like, " That's so perceptive and well worded." And again, I can't quite explain it other than my whole being goes, "Oh, yes." And that's not to be a troublemaker. Possibly more of a trickster.

VG: I love the word peril. It makes me think about reading books when I was a kid, like adventures or quests. There's something of the quest about it. I was thinking about being a bit of a troublemaker just then, because I was like, "What would it be like if I introduced you as a philosopher", and just didn't mention art at all?

So, if instead I said, "Hester is a philosopher, what would be lost if we didn't have either the philosophy or the art? I think it's really interesting. Or it might be that they are somehow two sides of the same coin or something. I don't know, but there's just a real intimacy. Seems to me like there's an intimacy between the two.

Figure 2: Brain Rushes [courtesy of the artist]

HR: Yes. I would agree there is something about that intimacy between the two, um, kind of a very tiny, tiny gap between them. And I suppose I start to understand that it's not about being a philosopher, it's the liberation of and the unruliness of being an artist reader, which is to go on an adventure with the text and to take liberties.

I mean, philosophers might well think I take liberties, but it's not to take liberties, but to be undergone by them.

VG: I like how you say that. I've read that in some of your texts that you sent, that somehow, you're undergone by it [philosophy]. Some people

might say “to be *undone* by something” but to be *undergone* feels even more . . . well, it's different at least. I think there's a difference between the two, and it felt very specific to you.

So, I sent some points, some landmarks, some topics that we might use as jump off points, but my autistic brain is just fixated on peril. This peril and the quest. And I'm kind of wanting to somehow, um, like thread that through our conversation. Some of that wonder and that excitement.

I think for me at least, being able to say that I'm an artist does allow me to have certain kinds of adventures and take certain kinds of liberties and, and to be improper in some ways. It also allows me to access philosophy in a way that I don't think I would be able to justify if I didn't also say that I was an artist. It's like there's some sort of entry point there for me if I enter philosophy as an artist.

VG: There's another quote from the same interview with Sasha, you said, “I was only feeling alive when reading philosophy,” and that really, really resonated with me. There's been times in my life where I have literally slept with books of philosophy. I won't name any names. I don't want to be too personal!!! But, um, I have slept with those books, I've carried them in my bag wherever I've gone as a companion. And I've felt that I've needed that because the proximity to it has also reminded me of who I am, and that dimension that you said you wanted to flourish within.

For me, I guess the aliveness would probably be this sense of “YES!!!” - it kind of activates me, runs through my body. It's not a technical understanding, and usually I'll read something and would find it very hard to explain back what I've just read. Although, as I'm reading it, I'm absolutely certain that I probably could have also written that myself. Perhaps in another virtual actual parallel universe! So, what does that aliveness feel like for you?

HR: It's so interesting - I'm getting the same vibe from you on this - the aliveness is carnal. Yeah, as well as mental. And I think the aliveness is because, I mean, sometimes what I'm reading is just so stimulating and it's an excitation. I think humans have this ability to excite one another. And I think we rarely do that, sadly, in the realm or the way I'm trying to talk about. But I think it's because, somehow, carnal being and thinkingness are sort of put into movement.

Figure 3: Furniture for my Skeleton [courtesy of the artist]

And maybe it's a bit sort of little of me, but, um, you know, I know it's hugely problematic in today's thinking academic world to talk of the subject or subject “I.”

And I appreciate all those reasons, but there is something about the needle and the hole, and the way needles link to fabrication and making. And yes, their pain. I’m often pricking myself and bleeding. But they're so constructive and it's like something threads through you, but it's not just you. So, it's very, very particular.

I'm here with my hands reading this book. Something is being confirmed, like you say, that I almost had felt thought but couldn't. And then it's kind of there in the words and it is a content, but it's not a content. It's also a shape of something that's both felt, but like a shape or a space, it opens up a kind of potential. And it's not just mine. I mean; I don't think that we should just feel that because we've read philosophy. I think there are other ways we can get that.

But in today's world – and I don't know if this is relevant or not, but for all the importance of information and knowledge and communication, my interests in art and philosophy have got nothing to do with communication, information and content. And I don't know the full implications of that, but I'm quite certain that those things have their use, but they're really cultural aspects of the human sphere, where it closes in on itself and protects itself.

VG: And does that make it hard then? In terms of being a practising artist in this culture, it can be difficult to get support for our work if we aren't making something that is easily communicated, or is sharing information, be that political, or is definitely “about” something, as in, it doesn't have content yet.

In my experience, it’s difficult because often there isn’t something that I concretely want to communicate, there's no information to impart, and there's no solid content quite yet. That makes it really difficult to put things in the world. And therefore, maybe that's why I've also felt that philosophy has been a really good place to explore ideas, because sometimes art doesn't allow for that. It doesn't allow for philosophy to happen. Weirdly,

HR: Yeah. There's such a tension in my practice, and there are certain strands of my practice, particularly stuff linked to the suffragette movement, which is about conscious liberation and things like that, where those works can have an “aboutness”, and that can be very enjoyable. But in terms of landing in my key practice of art and philosophy, then it's really, really difficult. I'm continually pondering, “Should I stop making art objects?” Because, as much as I enjoy doing that, I wonder.

It's not that it's counterproductive. It's not. But it's like, “Am I trying to be a misfit?” But I also know I don't want to be a writer or write philosophy. So, the messy thing it comes back to is this notion of the art of life. Working with one's material is actually quite important. I’ve started to realise that my practice is a life practice, and I understand that might not be relevant to anybody else. But I'm not claiming any important ground for that.

There’s a term from Heidegger about a poet in which he talks about “the friend of the house.” When I say friend of the house, it's almost that Heidegger means the cosmos. He means the wider world and the very fact that we're not just grown through culture, we’re grown through unknowable processes and this wider context. David Bohm is very interested in that too.

And then there's something I quite like about the humility of just being a friend of that. If I can just stay in friendship with that, then everything will be okay and I'll feel alive. And philosophy helps me do that. And then I start to see my art works, and think they probably don't look like that. And there's probably a mismatch between my thinking and what I do, but that's okay. At the moment, I kind of see my artworks - for all their art-worldly nature, and some of them have that, of course, I went to art school, I teach in an art school - but I really see them as furnishings, both domestic furnishings, in my room, and in that house.

And just like you'd want your room to welcome someone, or other friends who want to be friends with you in this sort of way, then I hope those objects welcome them or stimulate them. And on many levels, I mean, it's strange, but, you know, I am fascinated by a more cultish approach to objects. Like, my work can be quite richly ornamental and decorative and detailed.

Figure 4: Friend of the House [courtesy of the artist]

And, you know, art people and curators are always saying, “Oh, I wish you'd just go wild, you know?” And yeah, it is distressing because it's like, “Look into my eyes, I am wild!!’ I am really trying to stay wild. These objects are not where the wildness is, you know?

So, it's very hard sometimes, it’s just a documentation of the quest. Yes. They’re a documentation of the quest, or they're also for other people who want the quest, whatever that means to them. Just to kind of get a handle on that, but not an instruction. I don't know if any of that makes sense? And some philosophy opens up this spatiality that we can move in, but when we move in these rooms, something else can move too.

VG: You've used so many words like “wildness” and “flourishing” and “unfurling” and “creatureliness” and “carnal-ness.” I think that all of the things that you're describing around those different states of being or aliveness is kind of what I suppose led me to identifying, at least at first, as autistic. And that wasn't through a diagnostic framework. It was through recognizing a kind of kinship with other people who were autistic, people like, Mel Baggs, or DJ Savaraze’s writing, and Erin Manning's work.

It was a very, very slow process of recognition, but not at all in a diagnostic framework, but in the framework of creatureliness and feral-ness and a certain kind of aliveness that I didn't experience necessarily with other humans.

Figure 5: Art Ancestor (Cradle of Humanity) [Image credit: Anthea Pokroy]

And I suppose some of that also is my tendency to, you know, people have often said, “Oh, you spend a lot of time on your own.” And for me, I don't experience it in that way because I have very alive relationships with the so-called inanimate objects in my house, and the world, that I feel engaged with and feel that are engaging with me in some way.

And so, I was wondering, if you feel comfortable, just saying something a little bit about where you might intersect with that. And, you know, I always say this, I'm not interested in diagnosis. Formal diagnosis is irrelevant. In the same way as with philosophy, “Where is the point of identification or where is the needle threading through you?”

When we had our first encounter, our first conversation, there was a kind of recognition that goes beyond whether we have a diagnosis of autism or not. But there's the needle threading through my body and yours as we speak that makes us feel alive, that releases some of that wild carnal-ness that that for me, is like the essence of what it means to be neurodivergent. Um, so all of that long winded way of circling back to the terminology and how you identify or not with that.

HR: Everything you just said, I just really appreciated and recognize. I'm the same in terms of spending a lot of time on my own, because everything is so alive. And from childhood, I feel I was brought up as much by objects and things. You know?

VG: That's beautiful. What do you mean? I want to know about that. When you say “being brought up by objects” that's just, wow!!

HR: I suppose part of my head, my brain, I now realize, was not just receptive of what you might call the human social interactions, of which, of course, I was also part of. So, it was like I took place in other ways as well.

VG: Oh, that's lovely “I took place in other ways.”

HR: I can't . . . it's hard to explain. I mean, I can remember lying in bed and feeling the shape of a corner of a long hallway in a different part of the house, pressing into my sternum. And I didn't have to think. I wasn't thinking, “Oh, I wonder what shape.” I mean, it just happened and it was joyful. It's like a . . . it's . . . it's like an excess of something.

I know that generally in that kind of “culture club/human club” way, excess is messy. An excess of bodily fluids, an excess of passion, an excess of female emotion, or all of these things. So it wasn't that I got instruction from those objects, but as a little creature, starting to grow up – and I think this happens to all of us, I mean, you know, our little hands would touch objects and that object would be huge, and that little hand was already remembering or still wired with touching our mother's breast or our siblings, the smells and the feel of food and excretion and, and all of those things are still open to us now, of course, but they just tend to get pushed away.

And so, I think objects and colours and atmosphere - atmospheres particularly - were kind of just part of how I grew. Yeah. And, and I do feel that, and it’s when I'm making art, but not all the time, which I find tragic. And I don't know if that's because I'm so sensitive. I'm not confident at all. And I'm kind of glad I'm not confident because it keeps me very open and dynamic. But there's so many problems in today's world with not being confident, especially when you're a very sort of Amazonian looking, almost six-foot woman who's very muscular. Everyone expects you and wants you to be this sort of really confident, wow person.

Inside I really like the trickster tension between flourishing, very robustly, in a universe-way, in my neurodiverse brain way. But I also feel quite vulnerable and, and cut up, through that other stuff. And this is when diagnoses do help because since my official diagnosis of neurodivergence, I just stopped worrying about the cuts. It was like, “oh, oh, oh, okay. No one ever meant to cut the world, they never meant to cut. You know, it's okay. Hester, you're not mad to be building this house, to be the friend of the house.”

HR: As you were speaking of those things [earlier], I just feel this huge surge of energy. Yes. Just as you see the sun rising on a model of a building. I just feel that. So, I feel the rightness of all of that. I'm trying to explain how objects brought me up and it's really hard not to do that. But when I'm in my practice and I'm allowing myself to kind of shut off, what I call, all the noise of information, communication, human expectation - um, it feels really negative to say that, and I don't mean it unkindly or critically, but I need that world to go away so that I can really be in that wider world of space and objects and scent and smells and movement - when I'm working that way, just like you talked about live art, I really feel I can be that

creature, both carnally through the duration of time and the intimacy with materials, and the unfolding of what happens.
But also, for me, because I am so meaning-based, and interested in that mental pole of everything, I also like to take place structurally, within a dimension of, at least what feels at the temporary time of the performance, a kind of meaningful force field that I can then move through.

And I think all of those things I am now comfortable with, but they risk incoherence. They don't make sense in terms of information, communication, knowledge.

Figure 6: Kant Paint, Won't Paint [courtesy of the artist]

VG: When you described being in bed and feeling in your sternum the corner of the corridor in another part of the house, it made me think about synaesthesia, for example. For me it's the feeling of, from a very young age, being aware that the senses are non-local, non-centralized, non-linear and a-temporal. So, everything is kind of diffused across the house. We could use the metaphor of the house, meaning the house that I grew up in, the house of philosophy, the house of art, whatever . . .

When you said that I had this really strong connection to my bedroom when I was a kid. I was upstairs in the eaves of the house. And at certain times in the day, when I was standing still, and only in a certain part of the room, I would get the sensation of a woman with long, dark ... I could describe the woman with long, dark hair ... speaking to me. But I would feel it in my sternum. This pulsing urgency of somebody speaking really, really quickly.

Things like that have been a recurring experience for me throughout my life. Sometimes that's been considered in a neurodivergent sense, or a spiritual sense. Sometimes it's been a concern. Psychiatrically it's been a concern. Um, but I was connecting that to maybe experiences like clairvoyance or the senses. So, there's this kind of fragmentation and diffusion that I was aware of from a very, very young age that I think has everything to do with the kinds of philosophy that I'm interested in.

And also, what you just said then about the feeling in your sternum, there's been periods of my life where I've gone through what would clinically be called depression. The sensation has been like . . . I call it “the chalky sensation.” And it's like, if my sternum was rubbed, or like two pieces of chalk, or rubbing wood together to create fire, that's the kind of feeling that I have. So, when I've tried to explain depression to different people, all I've had is, well, it's like my sternum is rubbing and it's like chalk!! I don't know if that makes sense.

HR: No, it makes, it makes total sense. I mean, I think that's why the work of David Bohm has been really important, particularly the more recent work since Covid with one of his close friends and the editor of his books linked to dialogue, creativity, and the more philosophical work he did, because he was by profession, a physicist.

Bohm had an implicit understanding that things happen on lots of levels, and that we can be available to different dimensions. And that didn't mean that we can necessarily understand other levels because the levels of reality through physics are, you know, wild and chaotic. And, you know, where our brains are, you know. He thought the brain was an antenna, which really resonates with me. Um, but nonetheless, it's a particular shape and affordance within multifarious affordances and levels.

We have what has been called “the pain body,” kind of like the dark melancholia of humanity. But we close off this innate capacity, yet we have

to be open on these different levels. And when I first met Lee Nichol, (long-time friend and collaborator with Bohm), he gave a talk online during Covid. It was an amazing talk where he really opens up David Bohm's work through the body, and his ideas about culture and humans and the cosmic within the individual, which he talked about, but not in a new-age necessarily spiritual way. I don't have a problem with those levels, by the way, but I think it is really powerful when you have somebody who's quite scientific. An academic who's prepared to invest and talk about these other levels and experiment with his own body.

He would talk about coming to some of his theorems and ideas about physical or actual reality as a physicist, through thinking and visualizing through his body. I hadn't known all that stuff, but that's because Lee would talk with him a lot. They were really good friends. And, Lee, you know, wanted to share these things about David Bohm. He was so surprised that a group of thirty or so people around the world were interested in this, and themselves practice Bohm Dialogue, and that we ended up forming our group. We're down to twelve now, and we've been meeting for five years every month. But anyway, at the end of that talk, when he talked about David Bohm's concerns that we keep both the individual, the social, cultural, but also the cosmic in a kind of dynamic movement.

It's amazing for me; it's living-thinking exposed to these other forces. That's what Bohm dialogue is. But it's very rarely that because of who we are and where our blocks are and our expectations, and also the very manicured, if beautiful and clever topiary, we have through language. Towards the end of his life, David Bohm was quite frustrated with what was happening with Bohm dialogue, and it's never really taken off as a mass movement, which is a shame because it's so simple.

Lee had said to him, “Why do you think this is happening?” And there are lots of reasons that I'm sure Bohm went into, such as, the over professionalization of it, using it to solve problems, trying to over direct it as an instrument. Which of course cuts the movement and the porosity of humans opening up together within the Holoflux or within these different orders of reality.

Um, but anyway, Bohm had said to Lee, as it happened before he died, “Well, you see, I think the problem is that within the social, cultural and

cosmic, the individual is not doing enough work." And by that work he meant to sort of undo the problems of individuality.

VG: Or the human? Just the human . . .

HR: Yes. At the end of this amazing talk Lee Nicoll just said - and of course, it wasn't just what he said, it was the force of a life that had flourished and worked hard with all these things with that voicing. And that's a voicing that doesn't just come from the individual. It comes from all the matter and all the flux and all the flow - he just said, "You must experiment with yourself."

Figure 7: Monument to the Gods (Ymedaca) [courtesy of the artist]

I mean, of course. Ever since I was a little creature, we've been doing that. But art is a way to keep that, absolutely. And entice others into it. And coming back to your peril - because the universe is at stake every single second, not because we're so important and we can vanquish the universe, of course we can't, even though we're doing quite a good job of messing up our planet on a certain phenomenon level - existence, the

universe somehow is at stake. And part of being alive is to live in the peril and the absolute wonder and joy of that.

So yeah, to have it worded at that point and in lockdown, which is when I really unravelled as a neurodivergent person in a way, because it was like I didn't realize how much I was masking, because you always think, “Oh, well, masking is performing something so different to what you are.” But yeah, that's the complicated one. And then to hear that, as I was already letting the e-motion of the physical world and objects really come get me. Eat me up. So edible, with you. That's how it felt. And then to have Lee say just that was just like, “Okay, now I'm in the river. Now I'm in the rapids.”

VG: That makes so much sense. I also really loved what you said about, Bohm's philosophy or practices perhaps not taking off in a way. I think when we try and instrumentalize anything, I think you're right, the movement does stop. The wonder stops, because it's being used sometimes in a way that's at odds with its essence.

I've been thinking; how can this experimentation with self, which for me has happened in the spaces of art, philosophy, and conversations like this, be brought into the daily, and for me to not be masking as much? What are the small things that I can do to bring my creatureliness along? That's something I feel really passionate about at the minute in terms of integrating those worlds.

I had a weird encounter this morning. I go to a coffee shop every morning and - I promise this is relevant!! – but there were a couple of things that happened in a short space of time. I overheard a conversation whilst another person was ordering coffee, and she was talking about a woman that she knew when she was a child and how everybody called her a witch, and she would be teased for being a witch. And, I felt this real flood of protectiveness over this so-called witch, and everybody was laughing and, you know, creating this idea, this vision of this person who is the witch.

VG: And I kind of cut in and said, “Oh, that's really strange because, from when I was a child, I was always called a witch, you know?” And at times in my adult life, people have also called me a witch. But I think what that means is I've been a person, a creature, who has entered the pain body and has been willing to experiment with myself in order to get out of myself.

And then, just after that, the coffee barista had a book that had been left in the coffee shop anonymously. Nobody knows who left the book, but this book has been left repeatedly, and they've kept throwing this book out. And I said, “Why would you throw a book out?” And they were like, “Well, it's just nothing . . .”

I asked to see it, and it was this really beautiful little book with the drawing of a foot on the front, and inside it's poetry and fragments of experience. I did a very quick search of the author of this book, and it turns out that it's a regular who goes to that coffee shop. It's a man in his fifties and [his website explains that] he's neurodivergent and he's passionate about expressing himself and what it's like for him to be neurodivergent. And I had said to them, you know, maybe this is someone who comes in the coffee shop and they're leaving this as a seed? Maybe they don't feel like they can be themselves in this space, or they want to bring some of themselves along in this space that, you know, they feel unsafe to do. Maybe it's an artist like me, you know?

I felt so sad for this person who's going in that space, is experimenting with themselves, is doing the work, is not closing themselves off, but is leaving that book repeatedly as an invitation to say to someone; please read this or please connect with me. And I just wonder what that is, that impulse for them to throw it away and for me to want to know who it is?

HR: That is powerful, including the coffee shop. Where would we be without shops and coffee!?

I just want to say I was completely moved when you talked about it. It makes me feel very emotional. I feel very emotional about it. Yeah, I feel I'm talking about emotion where it's like, on behalf of everything. Yes, on behalf of everything. I just want to say [to that person], “Great, that you wrote those poems. Thank you.”

He's on a quest, and they excited on our behalf. It's not about, “give me a poet laureate. Me, me, me.” They were excited about something. On behalf of all of us, because this *is* exciting. And then you were open to that, and you saw that, you know. And it's almost like whether you read the poems or not, there is this thing that happens and then you see that as a seed.

If I remember back to earlier on in the conversation with these movements, and beautiful stuff, and then the question, “What is art?” You know, why, why would we do all this, and experiment with the self, and be at home, build this, be the friend of the house? Is it a waste of time then to write or to make an artwork? Is that just ego gratification? And you think, no! No!! Because they're seeds. They're not trying to be “it” in their own right, even if they're absolutely gorgeous. They are these seeds.

So, there's just something about that idea of - rather than trying to tell people, or tell everyone what I might think, or what you might think - that idea of planting the seeds is so generative. I just like the nature metaphor of plants. Lee [Nichol] always uses this really nice phrase of things that are earth sprouted. And he means us, as creatures.

VG: So that, I suppose, leads on to what should probably be our final port of call, which is another question that you've had in your practice, which is, “What are the problems of culture and aesthetics that get in the way of recognizing art?”

It's funny because, what is it that got in the way of the people who picked that book up and threw it out. Not that they would need to necessarily recognize it as art, but as a kind of humanity, or a seed, or a message in a bottle, or an adventure, you know, or a magical thing. You know, it’s almost a very childlike thing to do; to leave a signal, a sign. Who might pick this up and what might come of this...

What are the things that are happening, do you think, in culture and aesthetics, that are instrumentalizing experience in a way that takes the peril, the quest, out of how we experience the world?

HR: Wow, that's so beautifully put. Whenever I try and talk about this particular thing, I end up sounding very black and white and didactic. So, I haven't yet found the right way to do that. I'm hoping through the PhD I'm soon to write up that I can do it in a way that does justice to it. Which is why to start with that last sentence you said is, in a nutshell, exactly it.

And it is complicated. But I think, in a very prosaic, straightforward way, we can look at someone like Heidegger, who was really concerned about aesthetics and the over humanization of the arts, where we humans set up the measure and then carry on with that measure, even when the measure

is called “experimentation.” That outside, what Bohm refers to as “the deeper stranger intelligence,” is outside that of our own intelligence. And he doesn't mean a God or anything like that, it’s this mental and carnal pole, and absolutely everything on every level of reality. I mean, this is something I might want to come back to in a month's time or something, and do a better job of, because it's so important. But I think the problem with art is that it's become too cultural. And I know that sounds ridiculous, but that is the problem.

Figure 8: Guardians' Robe (artist substance) [courtesy of the artist]

And it's a difficult one because I'm not saying that art is not human and comes from somewhere else. But for me, even the letter A . . . I sort of deliberately start using “the big A.” Not to be grandiose, but because it looks like an electricity pylon. Yes. And I've always loved electricity pylons. I know people think they're ugly, but I find them quite powerful. These veins running across, allowing our lives to happen. An amazing example of difficult human-shaped-ness, that's also quite stirring, and slightly uncanny.

VG: They're like totems to that the desire to connect.

HR: You know, that's exactly it. They are like totems, and especially as a child, because as children, we’re really open to that. I was, I mean, I could stare at them forever. Forever.

VG: God, I'm scared. I'm scared of them. You know, it's really funny because I was walking through a field a few years ago. I remember this. There was quite a few of them going across this field and I felt completely afraid and overwhelmed, and the presence of it was just so strong. I was like, “I just cannot walk through this field.” It's just too much for me.

HR: They are very strong and they're very strange. And I think it's so paradoxical because there's me saying “friend of the house” and the house is a cosmos and whatever. But then, I think - and I love a lot of the art I see, so I really don't want to sound like some cynical person because I'm not - but I need some of that non-human strangeness. In the apparel, in the atomic structure that put that piece of work together. Of course, it's going to be human made. I love that. I love using my hands. I'm a big believer in the hand brain cosmos.

But I need some sort of movement . . . some sort of . . . I call it “the otherwise molecule” because it's coming from us, but it's otherwise. It's not just material; it's also about thinking.

VG: Do you mean that as in, to be wise as well, as in both ways?

HR: Lovely, I love that. I get that from the work I've done with my body, with my senses, sort of through the whole flux group with Lee Nichol. And I think sometimes you get that in art. I mean, that's what's so incredible. And

sometimes it can be a child's drawing, or an artist who is really committed to material processes, and probably would go, “Hester” ... you know, “Good for you, but Christ, shut the fuck up!!” “Get back in your studio, girl.”

Um, and I would really laugh and be delighted by that. But also - just as a parenthesis, because I haven't said it yet and I think it's relevant, at least to me - part of this thinking and reading and doing is the adventure and putting at peril. And I think this comes back to neurodivergent sensitivity. It’s that world of culture and humanization as a system, rather than a potential field of unfolding, that hurts me. Has always hurt me.

So yeah, that's where I've risked going mad sometimes because you just think, “I actually can't bear it.” But I don't feel depressed, I feel gloriously alive and grateful and want to flourish and recognize the flourishing of everything else. So why do I feel in such pain?

VG: Just going back to that anecdote about the book, this creature was unfurling in the space, and it was shut down, mocked. That benchmark, that framework for value judgement, to me, doesn't really belong with art in that way. But I find it really interesting how we move so quickly to that end point. Like what is its value? Is it worth something? Is it good? Is it bad? . . .

So, I guess just to close, is there anything else that you want to say? Because I know what it's like when there's something that needs to be said and then things end and then you can't say them!! And it doesn't have to relate to anything. Like it could be anything. Is there anything that feels that it needs to come out before we finish?

HR: Um. I don't think so. It's both fantastic to be able to feel and think like this. And, you know, I've had to work hard for it, and take risks. But I also understand it's a privilege to be safe enough to hold a book of interesting poetic, philosophical stuff that vibrates with human frames of reference. I mean, that's so beautiful. And I think books of philosophy and poetry do that very well. But I think artworks can do it too, you know?

VG: That's so important because I think if I was to be more compassionate . . . I'm obviously still very activated in my nervous system from this morning and probably being quite defensive. But I think what you said there

is really true that. I mean, there have also been times in my life where I've been petrified of philosophy and art, because I've not felt stable enough to go into those dimensions.

It's also the case that for whatever reason, we engage with things on different levels, and some of that is about protecting ourselves. It's a trauma response. So yeah, let me just take a minute to be compassionate towards the coffee barista and all of the people who are throwing the books out. Yeah, I get it, I get it, I get it. I've been there too. I've done it, in different ways. I've done it. I'm part of that too.

HR: That's very powerful. And, in a similar way, you know - I suppose I don't know if this is a redundant thing to say, it's not an apology, but it's like - the adventure and swimming in the river is the thing. It makes it sound like I don't love art or objects, and I do. And doing justice through materials or an artwork to all of this is kind of impossible. And I try not to think about it. I just try and keep up this fact that I'm a “friend of the house” and that these objects are confirming the house. They are documenting, at least for me. And I don't mind if no one else [sees it].

You know, that's part of the work I do, they don't have to be for everybody. I mean, I'm doing it on behalf. There's an excitement on behalf of us all. I don't want people to throw the book away. I want them to grow with the seeds, write their own books. But people might look at my work and go, “How does any of that relate to anything she said?!” And, uh, yeah, that's the paradox of the whole thing. And I'm still, what is it, “nose to the grindstone?” . . . that's where I am, you know.

I mean, your phrase autistic joy is so powerful. I can't explain it. Those words and the associations, they just open everything up. So that's an unfurling. That's the flag. That's the deal.

VG: Well, thank you so much. I’ve got the best set of notes for our next conversation!! I just wanted to repeat the sentence that you said earlier on. You said, *“I took place in other ways.”* And I love that. For me that’s a kind of autistic joy, both what you said and what that means. So, thank you for that. Thank you for everything that you shared.

And I'm also going to go and think about pylons a bit more, and maybe go back to that field and try and venture through and get curious and

experiment with myself in that space. You know, go towards it. Thank you, Hester, thank you so much.

HR: Thank you as well. Because really, this is a thinking feeling together. I really appreciate being in this encounter with you. I deeply, deeply, deeply appreciate. Thank you.

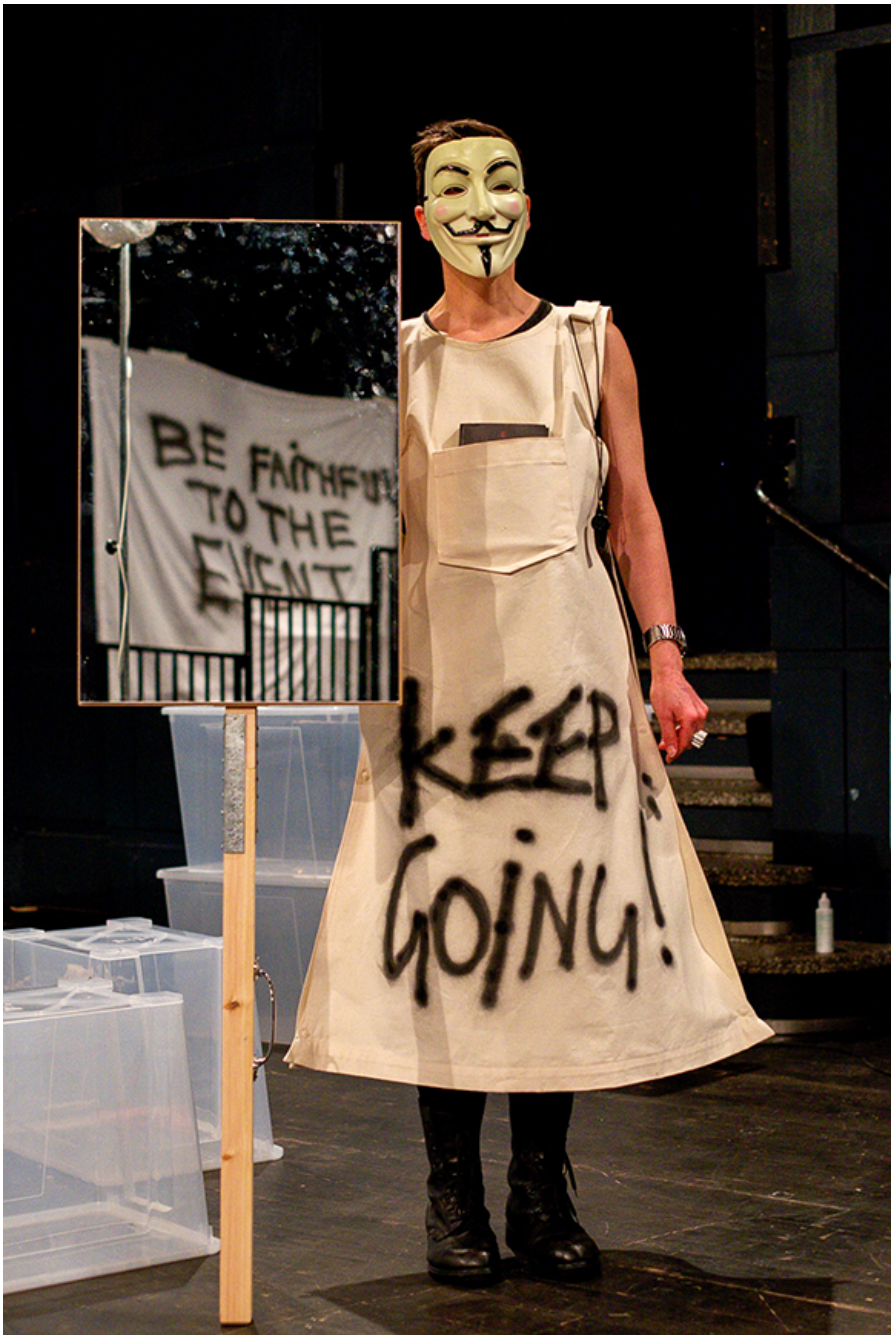

Figure 9: Philosopher-Artists: The Right to Protest" (action-intervention during the third biennial Performance Philosophy conference 'How Does Performance Philosophy Act? Ethos, Ethics Ethnography') [courtesy of the artist]