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## The Crown Letter roundtable discussion

Susan Barnet, Anne Brunswic, Michelle Deignan, Liza Dimbleby,  
Ruth MacLennan, Ana Mendes, Manuela Morgaine, Natascha Nisic and  
Esther Shalev-Gerz

Nisic recognized that the conditions of confinement created by the COVID pandemic and lockdown posed a threat to the visibility, exchange and experience of contemporary art, particularly of the work of women artists. Nisic invited women in her global network to contribute to the project and over time the network has expanded. Over 50 artists have now contributed to the publications and they maintain the online project collectively. As well as weekly publications, since the beginning The Crown Letter has hosted a weekly Salon for its contributors, where the artists exchange experiences, ideas and stories. In these times of confinement, where the effects of systemic inequality are felt across the globe, The Crown Letter harnesses the power of artistic exchange, collective energy, support and dialogue. As it approaches its first anniversary, some of the artists gathered at a salon to reflect on what The Crown Letter means to them.

**Ruth MacLennan:** Okay, it's recording. So, go Manuela. 1.

**Manuela Morgaine:** When I received your letter, Natacha, my mother was 2.  
dying from the virus, though she didn't die. So, during the lockdown, the only way 3.  
for me to go out was to go to the hospital. For me, it was a very strong experience 4.  
when I got your invitation, because it seemed that there was a new artistic, open 5.  
space, open mind, where there were no limits. Like you said, you would not judge 6.  
the work, we could send anything and it would be published. It was something 7.  
that was very new, that permitted us to be together, and without limits, in a total 8.  
freedom. And this was very important. As you all know, I never was in a group 9.  
of women, so it was very new for me. And I was very paralysed at first. For the 10.  
collaborations with you, I couldn't create at all. So, I just took the images of what 11.  
was in front of my window. And the fact that a place where paralysed work could 12.  
exist was very important. And this is the strength of your proposal. It's a letter, and 13.  
we were free also to send back a letter, just being very simple. And I think this is 14.  
what the salon and The Crown Letter offers. It's something that is very *inédit*, how 15.  
do you say this in English? 16.

**RM:** Unedited. 17.

**Esther Shalev-Gerz:** Original. 18.

**RM:** Thank you. I wondered whether Liza, maybe you could talk a bit about 19.  
your response to the invitation to write for The Crown Letter. I mean, you haven't 20.  
only been writing, but I think it's interesting to hear about.... I want to hear about 21.  
the kind of writing that comes into The Crown Letter. 22.

**Liza Dimbleby:** I didn't know Natacha, but Ruth had, two weeks in, invited me to 23.  
join. And my first reaction is always 'Oh, no, no, can't do that'. And then I thought, 24.  
'No, hang on a sec, actually, you know, maybe I could do it'. And I think the key 25.  
things that really persuaded me, were reading through Natacha's invitation, which 26.  
was very much... I want this to be an intimate space. You know, we were only a few 27.  
weeks in and how on earth are we going to respond or make, you know? I never 28.  
respond to anything for about seven years normally in my work. So suddenly, there 29.  
was this moment. And it was a letter, so... 'Okay, I'll write a letter back'. I'll write a 30.  
Letter from Glasgow. And then it was important that it didn't have to be a sort of 31.  
political statement or critique. It could just be something about this moment, this 32.  
actual situation where you are and what you're seeing, and what you're thinking and 33.  
then I realized, 'Actually, this rhythm of every week producing this became some- 34.  
thing really...' Each week I'd think, 'oh God, what am I going to write next week?' 35.  
And then something would strike me or something would come – fall into vision 36.  
in a way, and then a couple of days and something would emerge. Of course, it's the 37.  
kind of discipline we know from making art, but it was somehow being given this 38.  
form: to deliver and meet the deadline each week. And I tried to meet it every week 39.  
because it just felt fantastic to have this modest space of 500 words, I tried to keep 40.  
it short. But just having this letter, getting it there for Sunday, meeting people on 41.  
the Tuesday. Aand sometimes it was a gift, you know, it was a better way of making 42.  
work than a lot of other doldrum times I've had in my other work. 43.

I think the crucial thing was to do with actually the phrasing of how Natacha 44.  
conceived the original thing, which just had to be a word or something or response. 45.  
From where we were, at the time, it didn't have to be a 'work of art' each week, in a 46.  
sense, or what are our art preconceptions of what this work of art is? 47.

**RM:** Ana, because you've worked a lot with words as well, early on, I think 48.  
maybe you have something to say about... 49.

**Ana Mendes:** Yes! I think as a starting point, you have the beat of the magical 50.  
moment. I did not know Natacha and I had met her before, very briefly. So, it was 51.  
discovery of the work of Natacha and a lot of artists that felt quite special. And it 52.  
was also these unknown moments where we didn't know what we were reading, or

1. what was going to happen. And you're reflecting upon that moment at the same  
 2. time that it was unfolding. I liked especially when I was in Paris, and I could meet  
 3. with some of the artists and there was a sort of a Crown Letter in my studio. I quite  
 4. like this aspect of The Crown Letter that somehow opens other windows for other  
 5. things in parallel. I don't think that sometimes they are visible, or they are part of  
 6. the Letter, but they happen later on at the same time.

7. **RM:** Michelle, I wonder if you could talk a bit about the form of The Crown  
 8. Letter? I think that it'd be interesting to reflect a bit on the whole thing as a work in  
 9. itself, as well as the individual works.

10. **Michelle Deignan:** We had a conversation about this a few days ago, didn't we?

11. For me, there's been a whole series of different ways of engaging with The Crown  
 12. Letter through being involved in the back end of it. Having the privilege of really  
 13. getting to know people's work by looking at it before everybody else does when we're  
 14. about to put it online, and thinking through the connections, I was struck earlier  
 15. by what Liza said about modesty. The website has a sort of magazine format, so  
 16. there isn't a pressure for people to propose something or come up with an answer  
 17. within the work. That really allows them to be very much like propositions, and the  
 18. outcome of all the works coming together collectively is anything but modest.

19. What really strikes me is that in some weeks lots of ideas rub up against each  
 20. other, and other weeks there is a collective mood. And that's infinitely interest-  
 21. ing, because of our own differences in our own personal experiences, and also  
 22. because of what's happening in other parts of the world. And I was thinking before  
 23. this conversation, about my own trajectory of making works weekly, which has  
 24. been fantastic, really freeing. And because I work mostly with moving image, the  
 25. constraints of the website mean that I can only make a piece of work that would  
 26. last maximum, maybe three minutes, but usually around a minute. Because the  
 27. file size has to be below – I think it's 122 megabytes or something – before it blows  
 28. up or doesn't play on the website, I was thinking about how that discipline has  
 29. shaped my approach to making work over time, or of my expectations from the  
 30. work. There was one work I did back in the end of June, called *Just a Minute*. And  
 31. it's quite different from the other works, because it's an animation. And it was a  
 32. particularly difficult time for me personally, because my sister was having stem cell  
 33. treatments in the middle of a really intense lockdown in New York. And so, there  
 34. are lots of images in there that relate to her treatment, like these kinds of slide back  
 35. chairs where people who are getting chemotherapy have to sit and get hooked up  
 36. to IVs. But I was also thinking about those kinds of objects – a recliner – as some-  
 37. thing we aspire to in our old age. We're all travelling there, we're all going to that  
 38. space... And I look back at where that piece sits not just in relation to my own  
 39. body of work, but in relation to what's happening that week in The Crown Letter,  
 40. on the 23rd of June to the 30th of June. And there's a lot of tension that week and  
 41. really different ideas. There's hope, there's looking in, there's lurking angst, there's  
 42. sorrow, there's fear, there's exhaustion, and people have approached it in very differ-  
 43. ent ways from photography, to sculpture, to collage. It's really interesting to me to  
 44. look back and see how we all kind of come together at certain points in our experi-  
 45. ence, and at other points, it splits apart.

46. **ES-G:** Yeah, there was a moment also – after a lot of silence – when suddenly  
 47. a lot of us did sound works. I very seldom do, and suddenly I needed to do some-  
 48. thing with sound. And I wasn't alone, there were other people and that was so nice  
 49. to have these echoes and then different kinds of realizations.

50. **MD:** Yes, and also the conversation between works. At points, people in their  
 51. own lives would drift away. Then they'd kind of come back and there was a crea-  
 52. tive buffering, if you like, and the expansion of an idea to other people's, almost  
 taking the baton of using a certain kind of material, as you said Esther, using audio

or moving image. There are some weeks where loads of people use moving image, and we're all in parks. And there are a lot of photographic images and we're all responding to nature, or that everything will become more kind of interior or in our domestic spaces, and then it all kind of atomizes again. I think it's a diary of what's happened, both personally and collectively. It's incredible.

**ES-G:** Also, there was this moment of Black Lives Matter? Do you remember?

**RM:** I think we felt that we wanted to focus on a conversation and it came through a salon, or we talked about it. I think it was several things at once; one is that the Black Lives Matter situation blew up and the sense of having to get outside and demonstrate and say things and articulate what you're angry about. To literally articulate it in words and actions. And so, we felt that we would not have images one week, that we didn't want to be making art that was sort of – you know – metaphorical, or maybe couldn't be read straightforwardly. But at the same time, there was also a discussion of feeling a bit uneasy about like, 'oh, now we're going to do something about Black Lives Matter', as if you're jumping on a bandwagon. So, I think that week we decided that to only have text was important, in that it reflected on those problems and those questions as well. We wanted to articulate our situation, articulate in words and see what happened. Also, there was the sense that there can be a real validity in paying attention to that personal in the collective space and articulating it clearly out there.

**LD:** Yeah, it actually has made a manifest sense, something that is both intimate and personal and collective at the same time.

**RM:** We called it polyphony, didn't we? Natacha?

**Natascha Nisic:** Yes. There was this idea from the very beginning that it's okay; it's a public space, okay; it's intimate, okay. It's not huge, but there is something strong and powerful in being able to gather all those voices and also to build up a form which is in a way for me very political, which is horizontal, which is not hierarchical. Everybody needs or has to learn a little bit about internet. I mean, we all are administrators of the website, all these things are part of finding out a way of having a sort of power. Power to express ourselves, and power to send it to the others. It's also for us, but there is this public, who reads us, who receive and are subscribers to the letter. So, the polyphonic was also a way of saying what we are and what we wish we could be, as part of this big contestation of what's happening in the world, you know.

**MD:** Yeah, it's interesting. I think what really struck me about it was that it was a proper moment for us to say we know that we're not in isolation as individuals, we're working as a collective, and then the collective sits within a political, cultural, social space globally. Personally, I found it really difficult to write. I felt more pressure than I had before writing for The Crown Letter. 'Oh, no, we're gonna put something in words, words are really fixed!' And so, yeah, it was a very difficult experience, but really worthwhile because it offered a new way of thinking about where The Crown Letter was sitting globally.

**RM:** From the list of questions that we've been given. What has been the benefit of The Crown Letter to you?

**ES-G:** Or was it a benefit?

**RM:** Or was it? Well, you said at the beginning, it was. You wouldn't be here if it wasn't. We're all here, because it is.

**Susan Barnett:** Yeah, it's just such a generous and generative space that has led to so much productivity. It's this simultaneous inward-looking and outward-looking activity. There are ways in which it becomes for me so much about being a sketchbook. So, there's a freedom to fuck up and to air and to try and experiment. And then, but at the same time, because it's for you, and I know you, these are letters to you, each of you. I want to send you something that is heartfelt. It's become very

1. important that I'm thinking of you as I'm making these things. How will this be read  
 2. by this one and that one? So, I think the voice of The Crown Letter is so much about  
 3. this language that we've built as a community during and over the time of the salons.  
 4. A lot of my work has always incorporated text, image text and moving image, but  
 5. these kind of influences of documenting and of journalism, in the work of Anne  
 6. and Esther, as well as all the imagery and moving image, has been so generative  
 7. for me. It's really extended my world an enormous amount, both in terms of our  
 8. engagement as a community but also for what I want to play with from the world  
 9. to work within my practice. I never would have thought I would use the scans from  
 10. my dental visit as part of an artwork, but it just felt like it had all my crowns in the  
 11. imagery. It's like, 'Oh, well, that's Crown Letter'. It's crowned, of course!

12. **RM:** Another thing that you say Susan, that triggered something for me is how  
 13. in The Crown Letter, we've also somehow honoured other people. Anne, for exam-  
 14. ple ... talking about your conversations with Svetlana Alexievich. I did a collabora-  
 15. tion with Yogesh Barve, who introduced us to Maithili and Saviya and three other  
 16. artists, who have contributed. And other voices have come into The Crown Letter.  
 17. With some of them it's to hear what they have to say. Like the way we've used our  
 18. families, for example, because they're actors to hand, right? They're not necessarily  
 19. actors, but sometimes they're there in a very light way – barely there – but they're  
 20. definitely there, especially during that first lockdown. I made these little videos  
 21. with my sons, despite some resistance, because we're together all the time they can't  
 22. help but actually be in the films.

23. **LD:** There was a moment when I think I got fed up with just writing my own  
 24. letters, and I went back to three months of the first lockdown, and just took out  
 25. all the sentences from all the emails I got from women friends of different genera-  
 26. tions. When I look back on this now there are people from five different decades,  
 27. different professions, different locations. I got really obsessed by all the different  
 28. things that were coming up, I just put them in the same font for each voice, so you  
 29. couldn't tell which voice was which. It felt like bringing them all close and being  
 30. surrounded by their words, which was really nice.

31. **MD:** We've shared these intimacies and we've had conversations about practice.  
 32. Sometimes in a salon we don't say very much, and sometimes we say a lot. But  
 33. actually, we know each other most through our work. You know, I feel like I really  
 34. know you, under your skin, from your work.

35. **MM:** There is also something about the fact that we are all around the world.  
 36. Ivana is in Argentina, Maithili in Mumbai. And Liza, you're in Glasgow. I mean, we  
 37. have London, Glasgow, Paris, Berlin, Mumbai, San Jose, and sometimes you're in  
 38. Buenos Aires, it depends. The fact that we can travel with you virtually, is some-  
 39. thing that is very strong in this period where we can't move. It makes us move.

40. **RM:** Anne, can you finish off this salon, so we can stop recording? (laughs)

41. **Anne Brunswic:** Well, I usually write, and then I started sending horizon videos  
 42. to Ruth and it was just great because I never expressed myself through images. But  
 43. I've never felt so free. And the second thing is that we're not, you know, women  
 44. oriented, but nevertheless, we enjoy very much the company of women. And also  
 45. sharing – I wouldn't call it sisterhood – but this atmosphere of confidence [indis-  
 46. tinct words, other speakers interrupt]...a non-competitive atmosphere as well.

47. **ES-G:** Yes, it's the listening part that is really strong, because we will read each  
 48. work and we look at each work in very great detail, much more than we would do it  
 49. in other forums. There are other artists who show work that they did during the lock-  
 50. down but, you know, here there isn't this commercial kind of interest but rather the  
 51. interest in how you're engaging in art today. I find that it has maybe cured me of this  
 52. reticence of not doing things with women or something. I really think through time I  
 came to appreciate quite a lot, all the sensitivities and the space given for each other.