

***British Art Talks* podcast**

Season 2, Episode 3

Ryan Gander: DIFFICULT TRUTHS TO LIVE INSIDE - TROUBLE WITH TIME

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[Music]

Anna Reid: *British Art Talks*, from the Paul Mellon Centre: Championing new ways of understanding British art, history, and culture.

Welcome to episode three of the autumn series of *British Art Talks*. I am Anna Reid, Head of Research at the Paul Mellon Centre. Ryan Gander was born in Chester in 1976. In 2017, he was awarded an OBE for his services to contemporary arts. His inventive, shape-shifting works materialise in many different forms, ranging from sculpture and writing, to architecture, painting, and performance.

Ryan's engagement with art histories is not without mischief. In his 2006 work, *A Future Lipsum Orum*, Gander invented a palindromic word, 'mitim', designed to be inserted in to newspapers, magazines, crosswords, or everyday speech, and meaning 'a mythical word, newly introduced into history, as if had always been there.'

In this episode, an array of contemporary artists are enlisted in a quixotic project, and a race against the clock. The voices of fifty artists make a set of remarkable numbers: a countdown from fifty in bingo calls. The funny rhyming calls evoke a history of a game of pure chance, based on random numbers, dating from the eighteenth-century in Britain. They include visual puns, enigmatic idiom, indicators of social class and religious identity. They speak of clandestine activity, village halls, commercial leisure.

First, a story. Part of a beat poem narrated by Ryan as author to his daughter, Penny, in a disarming and semi-autobiographical form. A history of artist navigating, inventing, transforming, ludic in time.

Penny Gander: Wheels, headphones, colours, bottles, snacks. Computers, grass, lollies. Can you tell me a story?

Ryan Gander: Yeah, what kind of story do you want?

Penny: Burglar Bill.

Ryan: I can't tell you that without the book. But I have written one. Do you want me to read you that one?

Penny: Yeah

Ryan: Do you know why we're here?

Penny: No?

Ryan: We're here because I'm going to read you something that I wrote. It's a bit like a story, and it's for people to listen to on their headphones like on the radio. What do you think?

Penny: Great... What is the story about?

Ryan: I'm not entirely sure, but I think it's a little bit about time.

Penny: What is time?

Ryan: Time is the stuff that makes up your life. Time is the thing that happens between being born and leaving the planet.

Penny: Why would you leave the planet?

Ryan: Well... Good question. Because your time's up. You know, the thing about time is that time can sometimes feel like it's going really, really fast, and sometimes it feels like it's going really slow?

Penny: Yeah

Ryan: I mean reeeeeally slow.

Penny: Sometimes time feels like it goes fast but sometimes it feels like it goes slow.

Ryan: Exactly. When does it feel like it goes slow?

Penny: When you're doing boring stuff, and not doing stuff that makes your brain strong.

Ryan: So does time go fast or slow at playtime?

Penny: Fast.

Ryan: When you're asleep, does time go fast or slow?

Penny: Slow.

Ryan: So should I start? Should I just read it to you, then?

Penny: Yeah. Yes, yes, yes.

Ryan: Ok, so there's three types, three ways of reading it. I can read it in three ways. Ok?

Penny: Ok?

Ryan: So which way do you want me to read it?

Penny: Well what ways are there?

Ryan: You were born in Chester in 1976; Or, I was born in Chester in 1976; Or, He was born in Chester in 1976.

Penny: Middle.

Ryan: Middle? Sure?

Penny: The middle one. The thir-the second one you read.

Ryan: The one that goes "he was born in Chester"?

Penny: Yeah, "he was born in Chester"

Ryan: That one, yeah?

Penny: I don't know what that one is.

Ryan: That one?

Penny: Mmhmm.

Ryan: Ok, ready.

Penny: He was born in Chester in 1976.

Ryan: And there are some things in it called footnotes. Do you know what footnotes are? Do you want to read them out? Do you know what a footnote is?

Penny: No, what's a footnote?

Ryan: A footnote is when there's extra information that's attached to the text, but it's at the bottom of the page. There's usually a little number. There's number one, and then there's a little bit more information. So you can read them, yeah?

Penny: Ok. Footnote one. Footnote two. Footnote three. Footnote four. I don't know what footnote one is?

Ryan: Ok. Do you ever use footnotes at school?

Penny: Yep.

Ryan: Exactly. Shall I read you the story now? Ok, here we go.

He was born in Chester in 1976.

Penny: Footnote one: "Artist biography". Dad, stop there. Is this story about you?

Ryan: Could be. Not the reality of me, but it could be me. Could be anyone.

He realises early on that some people will be blessed, others will suffer.

Penny: Footnote two: Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock*, 1970.

Ryan: And that his agency is not subjective. He didn't walk through a wall to get here today. He came through a door.

Penny: Footnote three: James Williams, *Notes Taken By The Artist During a Lecture at Princeton University*, 2019.

Why did he come through a door?

Ryan: Because only ghosts can walk through walls.

Penny: Mmhmm?

Ryan: I think it means that we all think we have free choice, but even choice has restrictions.

He knows that the world is not within his control, and so he begins to search for positive fictions to live inside. There is a moment as a teenager where he gains a fascination in the value of things.

Penny: Footnote four: You/He/I began to save money to buy a BMW. Becoming motivated by money.

Ryan: But especially in the value of non-physical things. Those immaterial things: spirits, gods, boundaries, tribes, laws, myths, flags, money, and corporations.

Penny: Why is it “Gods”?

Ryan: God is not physical, he’s not real. He’s imaginary. So you use your daydreaming to imagine him.

What other things are not real?

Penny: Dragons? Dinosaurs were real a long time ago. Dragons, unicorns, and things like ghosts. And snakes and... Snakes are real. But some snakes like with horns aren’t real, or guinea pigs with horns...

Ryan: If these things have a physical element, it is little more than a piece of cloth or paper, or a small chunk of earth. It is in that immaterial aspect that we dream up and project on to the physical world, where their power and importance lays.

Penny: Footnote five: John Higgs, *The Future Starts Here: Adventures in the Twenty-First Century*, 2019.

Why is it we dream?

Ryan: Because if things aren’t real, then you dream to imagine. To imagine what they represent. It’s using your imagination, and imagination is the same as daydreaming.

Penny: So is it like, you could daydream? If I was awake and I thought about a lizard with a horn sneaking up to me and grabbing me, and eating me, and I thought about that in the middle of the day, would that be a daydream?

Ryan: Yeah. Daydreaming is pretty good for you, isn’t it?

As he enters high school he becomes obsessed with semiotic natural signs. The study of them becomes his hobby.

The way some rich people try to look poor, while some poor people try to look rich. He is intrigued by the way values are relative. The way one could be little-rich in America, but with the same capital be big-rich in Britain.

Penny: Footnote six: 'Big-rich little-rich concept' told by Nicholas Logsdale.

Ryan: He starts to research early on about the sociology of absolute and relative poverty, as well as bread-line Britain, and necessities, comforts, and luxuries. He reads Talcott Parsons, Max Weber, and Emile Durkheim.

Penny: Footnote seven: A-Level Sociology, taught by Anne Turner at Bishops High School in Chester, UK.

Ryan: He tries to find the notion of 'excess' in everything.

Penny: Footnote eight: Incidentally it would 4 earths, or to be precise 3.9 earths, to sustain a population of seven billion at current American levels of consumption.

Dad, stop there a minute. What is 'excess'?

Ryan: Excess is when you have more than you need.

Penny: So like if I was really rich and I demanded more?

Ryan: Yeah, basically.

Penny: If I was the Queen and I demanded for more, would that be excess?

Ryan: Yeah. What have you got that is excess, Penny?

Penny: I've got more lego boxes than I need because I've got five.

Ryan: How many do you need?

Penny: Four?

Ryan: Annually, he wonders if he will outlive 'overshoot day'.

Penny: Footnote nine: 21 August 2020, Earth Overshoot Day marks the date that humanity's demand for ecological resources and services in a given year exceeds what Earth can regenerate in that year.

Why outlive 'overshoot day'?

Ryan: Overshoot day is..

Penny: Where they shoot like a world war?

Ryan: It's the day in the world where we use more than the world's got.

Penny: So like, we go out to space to find more toys? And then bring them in to the world?

Ryan: When we run out, that's overshoot day.

Penny: We've run out of stuff on overshoot day?

Ryan: Yeah, basically.

Penny: Why?

Ryan: Because we're greedy.

Penny: Why are we greedy?

Ryan: Because we think more is better or makes us better, or something like that.

Penny: Why happier?

Ryan: I don't know. Because we're only human, I guess. What makes you happy?

Penny: Toys and playing and school.

Ryan: Overshoot day soon replaces his birthday as a marker. In his early twenties, he moves to Amsterdam. A friend anecdotally tells him at a party, that at his current rate of reading he will only manage eighty more books before he dies.

Penny: Why is it so sad? Why?

Ryan: It's not sad. Do you think it's sad?

Penny: Sort of, because he dies.

Ryan: Yeah, that bit's a bit sad. That's the thing about running out, isn't it?

That at his current rate of reading he will only manage eighty more books before he dies. He's taken drugs and so this has a profound effect on him.

Penny: Footnote ten: Shirin Neshat.

Wait a minute. What are drugs?

Ryan: Like tablets, but the doctor says you shouldn't take them. The doctor doesn't give you them, and they make you feel and act a bit strange.

He begins to obsess about his limited future. So empty, so abstract. He begins to intentionally run late for appointments, with the idea that this will prolong his existence. This doesn't work well: it causes a great deal of conflict in his already ever-decreasing life and consumes valuable time.

Penny: Dad, wait a minute. What is 'decreasing'?

Ryan: That's another word for running out, as well.

Penny: So like running out of food, running out of water, and running out of stuff. I'm running out of technology. I'm running out of speakers. I'm running out of ceiling. I'm running out of grass. I'm running out of plants. So that you don't have anything anymore? They've almost disappeared? So like I've only got two pieces of food left?

Ryan: Ok, do you want me to carry on?

Penny: Ok, carry on.

Ryan: He realises that when he ever commits new experiences to memory, which seems to slow time, to stretch time, so he executes a plan to relocate to a different city every single year on overshoot day. He aims for large cities, and always tries to find temporary accommodation in the most densely populated areas. In a hope to increase his experience to time ratio. This prevents him from making strong bonds with people: his inability to settle down means he doesn't have a family. He is alone. He is running for time. Chasing a worry. [#preworry](#) is a distant memory.

Penny: Footnote eleven: You can search for this, it's a hashtag.

Ryan: Time: a fuel as exhaustible as the charms of Gaia philosophy. His obsessions become his insecurity blanket of deceit. He begins to avoid mirrors. In his apartment he covers all of the reflective surfaces with bed sheets. He fears watching himself grow old. On occasion, when he does see his reflection, a strange intermittent form of Prosopagnosia takes hold.

Penny: What's proso...motia...sia?

Ryan: It's a disease when you can't remember people's faces, so everyone looks new to you every time you see them.

Penny: So it's like I'm a random person now?

Ryan: Yeah, that's exactly it. That's right.

Penny: So if I had it and I looked at you, and then I'd think I was just sitting in a room with a stranger?

Ryan: Yeah, weird idea innit?

A strange intermittent form of Prosopagnosia takes hold. He deleted instagram from his phone, as he can't stand the idea that the stories just run out and that he might miss one. He's in such a hurry that he begins to put himself in increased risk. When conversing, he begins to miss the words at the end of.....

[silence]

That's it.

Penny: So why did you end it strangely?

Ryan: Uhhh, I thought it would be good to end the story reading what the story itself was doing. So I ended like this: he begins to miss the words at the end of ...

Penny: Yeah, you've got to do sensible choices, like 'go to school and learn'?

Ryan: That's the funny thing about counting down, isn't it? It goes to an end, and the thing about time is that it runs out, but you don't know when it runs out.

Penny: So like, if I were sitting in this room just doing nothing, sitting down. Would that be a waste of time? Or if I was sleeping in the day and I wasn't a baby, that would be wasting time? You do need to sleep, and you've got a whole seventeen hours to sleep at midnight. So you can sleep then, but use your daytime with all the things that you like doing, like gymnastics, drawing, or karate, or origami.

Are you scared that this story is a bit boring for people?

Ryan: Yeah, I'm always scared of everything that I do.

Penny: Did you want to be a writer instead of an artist?

Ryan: I wanna be everything, that's my biggest problem. What do you wanna be?

Penny: I don't know. I don't know what I wanna be. Actually, I got it: a gymnast teacher.

Ryan: That's a good idea.

Penny: Hey, I just thought of something. Bed time. So you actually are doing something at bed time. You're sleeping.

Ryan: Time is everywhere, everyone is dealing with time, in time. You know when I use the word 'time' the most it's negative or bad. Like "I'm running out of time", "I wish I had more time".

Penny: Whereas if you actually get on and do it, you have enough time.

Ryan: Ok, because the story is about time running out, or a person actually worrying about time running out all the time, I also thought it would be nice to ask fifty artists, British Artists, to count down.

Penny: British artists? British.

Ryan: To count down backwards. Do you know why they're going to count down backwards?

Penny: No.

Ryan: Why do you think?

Penny: Maybe... I dunno?

Ryan: Because when you count down backwards it shows that time is going to run out. Can you think of any examples when you count down, or when you count out loud? In your life?

Penny: I count out loud when I'm playing hide and seek, or counting on a number string. And when I'm counting on cards, or stuff like that.

Ryan: Do you ever count backwards?

Penny: Sometimes.

Ryan: Can you count backwards now?

Penny: 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, 0. So it's like in hide and seek where you count backwards or forwards, like 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, that shows that your time is running out for hiding?

Ryan: Ok mate, shall we go home?

Penny: Ok

Ryan: Come on, it's tea time.

Penny: Have we had lunch?

Ryan: Yeah, we've had lunch. Do you wanna hear the count down? The bingo calls?

Penny: Mmhmm!

Ryan: Ok, here goes:

Various voices of British artists:

- 50, half a century.
- PC, 49.
- It's almost too late. Number 48.
- 47, four and seven.
- 46, up to tricks.
- Halfway there.
- 44, droopy drawers.
- Down on your knees, 43.
- Winnie the Pooh, 42.
- Time for fun, 41.
- Life begins at 40.
- Those famous steps [door creaking] 39.
- 38, Christmas cake.
- More than 11, 37.
- Three dozen, 36.
- Jump and jive, 35.
- Ask for more, 34.
- All the threes, 33.
- Yves Klein Blue, 32.
- Get up and run, 31.
- Number 30, Dirty Gertie.
- 29, rise and shine.
- In a state, overweight.
- Gateway to Heaven, 27.
- Pick and mix, 26.
- 25, duck and dive. [bell ringing]
- Two dozen, 24.
- Thee and me. Thee and me.

- Two little ducks, 22. [quack]
- 21, key of the door.
- One score, 20.
- 19, goodbye teens.
- Coming of age, 18. [cheering]
- The dancing queen, 17.
- Sweet 16. I've never been kissed. [kiss]
- Young and keen, 15.
- Valentine's Day, number 14.
- Unlucky for some, 13.
- One dozen.
- Legs 11.
- Bo-Jo's den, number 10.
- Number nine, doctor's orders.
- Eight, garden gate.
- Seven, lucky seven.
- [music] Tom mix, number six. It's Tom mix number six. Tom mix, number six. It's Tom mix number six. Tom mix, number six. It's Tom mix number six. [unintelligible 00:25:53]. Number six.
- [music] Man alive, number five.
- Knock at the door, number four.
- Cup of tea.
- One little duck.
- [music] He actually went for my homie, for my only.
- Number one.

Anna Reid: Thank you to Ryan Gander for this episode of *British Art Talks*. Thanks also to Penny and our 50 artists contributors who are listed on the Paul Mellon Centre website. There you can also find other episodes in the series, *Leaving The House* with Lucy Skaer, and *The Gothic* with Elizabeth Price. Thank you for listening.

This episode was written and produced by Ryan Gander with Loftus Media.

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