

MINGJIA CHEN: Hi, I'm Mingjia Chen and this is *The 'D' Word*. Do you love poetry, books, photography, music, or anything else that doesn't seem related to dance? Every two weeks we interview someone phenomenal who works in these fields and is directly or indirectly inspired by dance, but they aren't dancers themselves. We want to know: How is the world actually affected by dance? This week we have Christie Pearson calling in. Christie is an architect, writer, teacher and urban interventionist, pressing at the limits of public space. She collaborates with communities, organizations and artists to create public events and build public spaces. She's also the author of *The Architecture of Bathing*. The book, published last year, examines traditional and contemporary communal bathing cultures globally from the perspective of art, architecture, and landscape. Christie, it is so lovely to have you coming on the show. I'm really honored to be talking to you today. Yeah, thanks for being here.

CHRISTIE PEARSON: Thanks for inviting me, I'm so happy to be here. And it's so great to meet you.

MINGJIA CHEN: Yeah! First of all, actually, before we jump into anything else, I wanted to mention that for your Fire on the Water project, it mentioned that you worked with Alex Samaras, who we also had as a guest on the show.

CHRISTIE PEARSON: Ah, great. Oh, that's terrific. I mean, that's an all star lineup. Everybody who participated in that show deserves their own show, because they're all like super geniuses.

MINGJIA CHEN: Yeah, I didn't recognize all the names, but there are some household peeps in there, and it was really exciting to see. And also, Juliet Palmer, who you mention in your book, that you started Urban Vessel with, I'm actually working with her right now for an Urban Vessel project. So this is a really great meeting of different paths. So my first question for you is: you define one of your roles as urban interventionists, so, what does that mean? [Laughs]

CHRISTIE PEARSON: [Laughs]. Probably I half made that up as a title in trying to figure out who I am and where I fit in, where do I belong? Everybody I know has multi-pronged artistic practice and has a bit of a struggle

to define themselves. Maybe that just seems to be part of our times? But for me, I think what I'm trying to say there is that I'm interested in art and performance, and those magic moments where we bring together a vision that is unique and share it, and that really stems from the imagination. But I want to impact the daily life of people as well. So I'd say urban interventionist, because I think that we can somewhat impact and shift the imagination, say, that the city has of itself. That's how I think about it. I think that every place has a collective imagination about what we are and what we're doing here, and how we might be together and do this life together in this place together. And I want to make artworks that impact that.

MINGJIA CHEN:

Yeah. Mhmm. Yeah, beautiful. And I think there's something so beautiful about doing things together, like you said, that over the pandemic has been really freaking hard because being together is the one thing we're not allowed to do.

CHRISTIE PEARSON:

It's so hard. It's so hard and I must say, promoting collectivity and art forms, including bathing collectivity, in the pandemic, is for some people a hard sell. It's like, 'No, we want to get away from each other.' But you know, in any other way, the pandemic has revealed how intimately connected we are. Like the illusion that we have separate bodies, even, is somewhat shattered. And, so in some ways, we may have experienced so much loneliness and aloneness, but we're also more connected. It sort of reveals our connectivity in another way that's worth thinking about, I think.

MINGJIA CHEN:

The good and the bad! It's like there's no sectioning and siphoning people off, like we're all doing it.

CHRISTIE PEARSON:

Yeah.

MINGJIA CHEN:

So, part of your work with building events and creating artwork in public spaces is collaborating with other artists. Can you talk about why that collaboration is so important?

CHRISTIE PEARSON:

I mean, it's partly because I love so many art forms so much. And the people who inspire me the most have ranged, let's just say, a long time ago I used to work for Bill James for a little while. You probably know Bill James and his huge impact on dance in Toronto.

And I worked for him building sets and I was always so inspired by his work in the way that it brought together, his fountain pieces where it brought together new publics, and performers, and visual arts, and the city, in all these different ways, so I was inspired by him. Then people whose work I love, from the beginning, the Dusk Dances world. I used to go to every single Dusk Dances performance, you know, dedication. So, what an amazing thing that you're not just sharing this with people who already love dance, you're sharing this with a whole city. With little kids who just biked by on their bikes, or the people who drop in who happen to be in the park. So I'm always inspired by performers who bring their art out into the world. And I've just been sort of watching and studying those people whenever I can. Musicians, and I think there's a huge variety of people who make forms of public art that aren't just like sculptures in a plaza.

MINGJIA CHEN: Right.

CHRISTIE PEARSON: I love all that work. I love that work. I love thinking about big inspirations. Also, Anna Halprin has always been a big inspiration to me. And she partnered with so many people, including Lawrence Halprin, her partner who's a landscape architect, and they came up with such an incredible range of ideas that transformed public space and involved sculptural elements, landscape elements, performance elements, but, she's a great inspiration in terms of how different arts can seam together communities and really transform how we think about space in the city. I don't know, that's a kind of endless, that's its own whole topic her work.

MINGJIA CHEN: Totally. Yeah. And I think that's something that's so compelling about even just reading about the events. What I would really love is if you could talk about what one of these events, like public art events, might look like, and how that might feel to someone experiencing it.

CHRISTIE PEARSON: I mean, I can just talk about Fire on the Water that you mentioned, is that what you were thinking? Like, what the experience would be like?

MINGJIA CHEN: Yeah, Mhmm!

CHRISTIE PEARSON: Okay, so Fire on the Water, it was like a multi-pronged call out to people. I think also, promotion can be its own creative artwork as well, say. So one strata of it is, I wanted to do a call out to people who are dedicated to making Lake Ontario swimmable. Like to bring attention to the fact that we are a beach city and that we should be able to swim in any of these beaches at any time. And we should clean up the beaches of Toronto. Okay, so, one group of people who are coming to Fire on the Water are swimmers. It's a swim in, right, so a swim in for water quality awareness. So that's one type of person who's coming and they know that there's a beach party where everyone is going to go swimming, and that's one layer of it, but when you would arrive there, you would also have access to the Sunnyside Bathing Pavilion, which is usually mostly locked up. Usually, you can just sort of squeeze in and try and find the toilet. Or if you booked it for your wedding photos you could have reserved this one courtyard and get photos taken or something like that. Mostly, it's closed. And so you would discover that the entire facility was open, and you could go wherever you wanted. That was the first thing. So that is something that I think would strike the participant because usually it's locked. It's public, again, it should be open for everybody. It was originally built as a place to go and change into your swimsuit and go up on the loggia and watch people swimming and look at the lake and stuff like that. It's a piece of public infrastructure that's been sort of semi-privatized. So you would experience it in its fullness. Then you would encounter different things going on in different levels. In the courtyard level you had a few installation projects, sound installations. There was ice cream. I'm not gonna name every single person because there's so many things, so, you know, shout outs to all of them. Please look up all the participants, amazing artists in many, many fields. You had an information zone about water quality in Toronto and people trying to clean up the beaches and the Waterkeeper movement. And then if you went upstairs, you would find probably the DJs zone. And we had a whole host of DJs playing hourly sets for 10 hours or something. Amazing DJs from all over the world. So there's a dance party, and you said party, it sounds like a party. It's like, for me, the party is one of the highest points of existence [laughs].

MINGJIA CHEN: Yeah!

CHRISTIE PEARSON: So I do like to make things a party when I can. And so there's all these people dancing and just enjoying the great DJ music. And then at certain moments, there would be actual sound events, there would be dancers starting to come, there would be live performers starting together. And that was sort of on the edge of the DJ zone. If you walk down to either end, you had two installations that ran for the whole day and night. And those I made with Juliet Palmer. Juliet Palmer did soundscapes for each of the two ends. So there's a, what I called the temple to the moon, and a temple to the sun. But they're also the temples to the two great rivers of Toronto. There's one for the Don and one for the Humber. And so Juliet did recordings at those two rivers as soundscapes in those little end pavilions upstairs. And they were big communal bathing spaces that were not based on water. One was ice, the moon one.

MINGJIA CHEN: Yeah.

CHRISTIE PEARSON: There's this huge container full of ice that you could play in. And then at a certain point, all those dances and musicians started to perform, and people started gathering together to the middle of the loggia, looking out at the lake, and there's a tremendous dance piece choreographed by Aimee Dawn Robinson, with multiple dancers in a single costume. And they both performed in the space, and were kind of the leaders for a parade that the audience had to follow them. And they took us on this journey, a performing journey through the space to different ends of it. And then downstairs around the building into the lake in the performance went right out into the lake. And there were people in canoes doing music as well, kind of a dialogue with the dancers. And then as the sun set, it was a kind of a sunset piece, as the sun set, you would see a kind of transformation of the thing and then Marcatu Mar Aberto came, a Brazilian percussionist, and a little bit more Carnival music starts up and they led us back up into the dance floor as it was getting dark. And so that was starting to get people to dance a bit more in that line of the carnival, a moving party, up to the dance floor. And then the DJ music got heavier, and it turned more into a dance party at night.

MINGJIA CHEN: Amazing. Many parties all strung together in this big, big party. Yeah, I think just hearing you talk about that is so moving. And it strikes me because, while it's so intricately thought out, there's so many parts to this thing, you really maintain the agency of the, I guess, audience member, partygoer, experiencer of the event. Which feels a lot like just being a person in a public space. You know, there's so many things happening, but like, at the same time, you as a person, you can move through it in a way that you want to. That's how it strikes me. And I really love that.

Music Break

MINGJIA CHEN: You know, speaking about water, and also about public infrastructure, I want to talk a little bit about your book, *The Architecture of Bathing*. It's such unique, amazing research, and I really, really loved reading it. And for our listeners who haven't read it, can you talk a bit about the goal of the book?

CHRISTIE PEARSON: Sure. I'm so glad you liked the book. And I think it's a bit, the title is a bit provocative, and saying 'the architecture of bathing', and that most people are gonna think those two words don't go together. And so I want to start out, it's like, 'What does architecture have to do with bathing?', and I think that sort of re-seaming of things that have fragmented somewhat in our society is part of the goal of the book. Maybe?

MINGJIA CHEN: Yeah.

CHRISTIE PEARSON: That we say, 'architecture of bathing', for one thing. That bathing is something that's really important and central to our lives, that prioritizes the body, prioritizes care, you know, and is often marginalized, as those things are marginalized. It is so central to our relationship to our environment. Bathing, our skin in contact with water or other elements, you know, it's quite grounding from an environmental perspective. And I think there's a lot of potential for us to build on cultures of bathing that reground us, you know, as society, but very much in community. And so for those who might open the book, expecting it to be all about your home bathtub, the other provocation here is based on my research and, you know, my experiences, that bathing architectures have been traditionally

public, as bathing cultures around the world are usually communal. The idea of the private bath is not the standard, even though it's what we perceive as the standard today. The book hopes to open up to everybody the roots of bathing practices as cultural practice. The practices that bring people together, into relation with each other, and into relation with the environment in a way that I think is really rich and full of promise. Also to give a kind of name to these places that we don't see, as part of a continuity, that the swimming pool is part of a lineage, that the Sunnyside Bathing Pavilion, or the wading pool, you know, those are things that we can find in Toronto, are part of lineages of bathing practices that evolved for many, many generations, and that they're in connection with global practices, from the sauna to the sento, sweat lodge, all of these things that people have come up with, and have influenced each other, as a very complex networked world of human cultures, where you cannot easily find borders as well. That principle of connection, I think, is so important, because if you try, like Sigfried Giedion is trying to figure out: What is the edge, where is the boundary of sauna? And if you take a sort of trans-historical, trans-local look at it, it's been spreading around into all of these cultures, I think that very part of it is so interesting. It's interesting for us as Canadians, so many of us have come from all over the world, and bring all of our traditions here. So I think it's also a provocation to people to build on some of those traditions, and create new bathing cultures, because they're always reinventing themselves. And they're a great site for artistic interpretation and reimagination. Whatever your art form is, and that's another part of the book.

MINGJIA CHEN:

Yeah! Yeah. This makes you want to take a bath right now. With people! Which maybe, you know, we'll wait a little bit for that. But, [laughs] we talked a little bit about this at the beginning of our chat, during a time where communal bathing is on hold for a little while, how has that impacted your artistic process? And how has that changed things? And how has that enhanced things for you?

CHRISTIE PEARSON:

The first thing that pops into mind are some of the amazing conversations I've been having with people from different parts of the world, about the crisis. And that, in itself, has been fascinating. Speaking to people who are in Tokyo, who are part of the 'save the sento' movement, preserve the tradition of the urban sento, and

how stressed out they've been, to talking to people from Norway,. Everybody's been experiencing the stress of COVID in the public bathing world. And I'm so impressed by people who continue to fight and recognize that there's going to be a way to keep their little local baths in operation, whether they're in Iceland or in Southeast Asia. Everywhere people are struggling with this. And I think that the global conversation is part of the special opportunity of this time we're experiencing right now because you and I are in different locations, we're able to have a conversation. These conversations have been getting very rich I think, no matter what your field is, in COVID because we've been forced to go remote. Remote and digital. So that's one encouraging thing. The other encouraging thing that I'm hearing a lot about from every country is people rediscovering their natural waterways. And so the movement to promote swimmable, bathable rivers, lakes, streams these outdoor spaces where you do feel okay in COVID swimming. Down at the beach, and let's take here in Toronto, swim Ontario Place, the swim Ontario Place and the cold water plungers who've been swimming in Toronto all winter long. These people are impressive. And they're forming new communities together that are trying to come up with something. This is inspiring for everybody.

MINGJIA CHEN:

Yeah. Yeah, so inspiring and, just the resilience of people and kind of really affirming that as people, what we want to do is make community together and also experience things through our bodies and be in the water! Yeah, amazing. So I want to pivot a little bit, so *The Architecture of Bathing*, we've talked about bathing, I'd love to ask, in terms of architecture, since we are a dance adjacent podcast, I'm wondering how static architecture can evoke a sense of movement, and how it can be designed in a way to encourage people to move in a specific way? Which you already do in your events, such as Fire on the Water with incorporating dancers and parties. But is there a way that you do that just through static architecture?

CHRISTIE PEARSON:

Such an interesting question, such an interesting question. And I think that's a question you should ask to every architect who's designing buildings and spaces, every urban planner, every landscape architect, needs to be asked, What are you doing for bodies? What are you giving us here? Are you implying a place

where I am forced to move in a straight line and there's nowhere for me to sit down? Are you creating a place which is going to be, after it's done, it's going to have to be covered with signs and little fences that say 'Keep out' or 'Stay off'? Or are you designing a place that welcomes people's full bodies, full range of movements, the desire to play, the desire to move and dance? I'll give an example of a great space designed by Kathryn Gustafson. I've just been talking to some students about this lately. It's a Princess of Wales fountain in Hyde Park in London. It is an example of a sort of reclamation of the fountain as a place for people to jump into. So in all the fountains of Europe that you might go and take photos of today, used to be full of kids. They used to be full of kids, a fountain was a place where you would go and get water and you'd also jump in and splash on a hot day. And you can find these, like, 16th century engravings of Fountains packed full of people and this Gustafson fountain is for entering. It is a rare contemporary fountain that wants you to come in and play and run around in and splash and experience all these different textures with your feet. It's really designed for the feet. And it's designed, if I was a dancer, I would do a performance there. But of course, we talked about the Halprins before and the whole Portland Open Space Sequence is very much designed by Lawrence Halprin to encourage people to move and to play and to jump and to experience like the delight in their bodies in public space. And you can see the opening of one of the main fountains in Portland, he put this big sign up that said 'Please enter'. [Laughs]. 'Please enter' in front of the fountain, to make it clear to everybody that he designed this thing for you to dance in and then many many people have danced there and continue to not just formally but improvisationally.

MINGJIA CHEN:

Amazing. That sounds like a great place for a party. I would go to that party. [Laughs]. Wow, that's so beautiful. Because it's true. I think sometimes, at least for me, I associate nature and the outdoors with being like 'Okay, now I'm in my body now I don't have to think', I can just be intuitive and move around and it's very open and sensual. And I didn't even notice until this conversation that when I think about architecture and buildings, sometimes I do associate it with 'Okay, now I'm out of my body. Now I am doing this thing. Now I'm in a box. Now it's time to like doo doo doo', you know, it's all up in my forehead.

CHRISTIE PEARSON: It is. And once you recognize that, I hope we all feel a bit of legitimate anger about that, because it's designed that way. And the designers were not always trained to think caringly and lovingly about what the body wants to do. It's more like channeling, or manipulating people, or forcing them to behave in certain ways. All that stuff is scripted into the design of spaces. And I think that young architects have really tried to reach out and say, 'You don't have to be part of that script, we can rewrite this, we can make other kinds of spaces, how are we going to do that?' Because it's going to take a big effort, collectively, to change that experience of walking in a building and doing exactly what you say, it's like, 'Now I'm going to not be in my body, I'm going to endure this.'

MINGJIA CHEN: Yeah, which is also quite ableist and is serving one specific type of person and one specific type of body. And I think that's what's so moving about your work is how expansive and inclusive it is. Like, considering all body types, and how to honor those bodies.

CHRISTIE PEARSON: So important, I'm always looking to projects that do that, and to inspiring movements of people who are trying to push for universal design, in more nuanced and fun ways. I think we can make design a lot more fun. But we can also make it a lot more inclusive. And that, again, is another amazing radio show just to highlight some of the practices and the activists, because these are very activist driven solutions that people are coming up to, to create buildings and spaces that are welcoming to everybody. They're not forcing you into some sort of gender prescriptive role, or ableist prescriptive role, or race or age prescriptive role. Because all of this dividing up that has been going on, segregating people into little groups and what they're supposed to do and how they're supposed to behave and where they're supposed to go and what door is for them and everything. No, this is the history. This is a recent history of a kind of colonial legacy in architecture. And we have to work to undo that. And there's lots of space, lots of work to be done.

MINGJIA CHEN: Yeah, I agree. Thank you so much for talking about that. I think it's so important in every single field to be thinking about how colonialism has left these massive footprints and how we can start to reckon with them and undo them. Yeah. So I'd love to, maybe for

a last question, just know a bit about what you're up to right now and what's in your future. And what's something really exciting for you?

CHRISTIE PEARSON: You know, right now, I found that after writing my book, I was a little energy depleted, and I could feel the desire to cocoon a little, and so I spent the winter sorta just hibernating a bit. I mean, doing talks has been very exciting and stimulating and sharing. And like I'm saying networking and having conversations with people from all over the world that is obviously, I already said, really exciting for me. And I would like to strengthen the infrastructures for these conversations in a global way in another forum. So I'm thinking about writing again. Writing something that's a little more specific about these innovative practices that are happening right now. And people are testing out new ideas for communal bathing. That's something that I'm working on. And then I think, also, there's a great desire to sort of play again. Just to do a little bit more exploratory play, where we can find that imagination for where the body wants to go and what the body wants to do next and, and so there's a couple projects I'm doing that are more body centric.

MINGJIA CHEN: Mmm. Amazing. And I know I said last question, but this is the real last question. I really want to know, for those of us who are listening from Toronto, and I guess for people who are outside of Toronto, do you have a favorite public space in the city?

CHRISTIE PEARSON: Ah, there's so many, nooks and crannies. I mean, I like that question as a sort of call out to all the listeners to think, for yourself, what is your favorite public space? And how can you do something with that? But I'll tell you what my usual answer for that is. My favorite public spaces are the libraries and the swimming pools. I'm gonna say together, the libraries and swimming pools are something very, very precious that we have. And so I'm gonna do a little public service announcement.

MINGJIA CHEN: Yes! Do it!

CHRISTIE PEARSON: Take care of your local library and swimming pool. It's an amazing set of infrastructures. Not every city has so many local libraries and

local pools that we have. And I think that we need to sort of be conscious of that so we can take care of them. So I'm going to say those, maybe that's my answer. And then of course, I have all kinds of secret places that I like to go and all of you do, too. And I hope that everyone listening goes and does a performance in their favorite place.

MINGJIA CHEN: Well, thank you so much, Christie. It's been really fun to talk to you. Thank you for coming on our show.

CHRISTIE PEARSON: Thanks so much for the opportunity to talk with you, this was so fun.

MINGJIA CHEN: And that's our show. You can find Christie Pearson online at christiepearson.ca and on social media @christiemaepearson. *The 'D' Word* is produced by dance: made in canada, a contemporary dance festival featuring Canadian dance artists who possess unique artistic visions and come from all cultural backgrounds. This year dance made in Canada presents inTO Focus in partnership with Canadian Stage currently scheduled September 23rd through the 25th at High Park's Amphitheatre. Visit dancemadeincanada.ca to find out more about this year's festival and to donate. *The 'D' Word's* creative producer is Grace Wells-Smith and the show is also produced by Sam Hale. Our editor and composer is Jamar Powell. dance: made in canada's co-festival directors are Janelle Rainville and Jeff Morris. Yvonne Ng is artistic director and also co-festival director. And I'm your co-host Mingjia Chen. The show is also hosted by Britta B. Thank you to Canadian Heritage, the Canada Council for the Arts, Ontario Arts Council and Toronto Arts Council for making *The 'D' Word* possible. Find us wherever you get your podcasts. Ciao.