

On the unglamorous parts of creative practice



Audio creator and sound designer Helena de Groot discusses asking difficult questions, paying attention to the banal, and finally doing The Thing

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As told to Alesandra Tejeda, 2385 words.

Tags: [Sound](#), [Writing](#), [Process](#), [Production](#), [Beginnings](#), [Inspiration](#), [Multi-tasking](#), [Creative anxiety](#).

I understand that you grew up with musicians. What was that like?

My mom actually took singing lessons when she was pregnant with me. I don't have a scientific basis for how that might've affected me, but come on, to live in the sort of resonating chamber of her body... I can only imagine that that left its impression. [Growing up in that kind of household] felt so comforting. There's something about practicing that I love. Whether my dad was practicing a piece on the piano, and my mom was going through vocal exercises, whatever, I find that one of the most reassuring sounds in the world.

Did you think that you would be a musician? Was that an expectation?

I wanted to maybe go into law, medicine, Russian, or piano, or maybe dance. I was very obsessed with ballet. My mom actually said an interesting thing. She was like, "If you love your art form, don't do it." Because when you make it your profession, all the bullshit that comes with professions will be a part of your love of music or love of dance, and you will have to deal with egos, and you will have to deal with favoritism and worries about money and... you'll have to do things or play games that kind of diminish the pleasure. So I really took that to heart, and went and studied Russian and Russian literature. A very practical degree. [laughs]

Was that her kind of admitting that she felt that way?

Oh, yeah. She told me that even when she would go to a concert, she would just be listening technically, like how is this person shaping their mouth? How are they projecting? And she just said, "I can't turn that off anymore."

I'm so interested in what drives someone's creative practice and what proximity does. Sometimes when you're too technical, you're too close. It gets rid of this kind of spaciousness that you need for it to feel really imaginative.

I've always wanted to do so many things [but] was always very confused about, what should I actually focus on? Dance, writing, and music...I realized at some point that even though I loved all three an outrageous amount, there was none of them really, but writing most of all, that I liked the unglamorous part of actually doing it. Actually learning it, not just the result. I love music so much that I feel sometimes, "I would die for music," if that was a thing. But I don't want to do the exercises. I don't want to. That's so boring to me. With audio [production], that's when I knew I'd found my thing. I love every bloody minutiae of it.

I started to realize a few years ago that, though there are lots of great podcasts in this world, some of them, especially post-podcast-boom, followed a very typical pattern or arc. Whereas in the Paris Review Podcast, you

keep elements, like the set-up to an interview or a bird in the background, that in other shows would be removed and considered unnecessary. You're using the world to score the world. It really transports me. Like in the [Scenes from Open Marriage] episode, an essay written and read by Jean Garnett], where you hear her taking breaks and the tension between her performative "reading" voice and her sitting-back voice.

In a way, for me, it always feels like love. You might not really pay attention to that when you are around and about in the world and there's a bird, "Okay, whatever, I've heard birds before." But all of a sudden in this context, where it is carefully edited, and kind of curated, it serves a sort of a purpose. You are there with [Jean] as she drinks her tea and then puts the mug on the table. All of a sudden everything is sort of imbued with a shimmer. It's elevated in some way. And so to me it's almost like an ode to banal stuff of the world.

It reminded me of Svetlana Alexievich, [a Belarusian oral historian who documented the Soviet and post-Soviet period], whose work I know you love, and something you've said about how "history is in the heart." I was reading more about her work and it being composed of so many interviews, and it strikes me that there's a difference between "these are a bunch of facts" and "this is the felt experience of someone in this situation at this time." And that felt experience is this really particular chemistry each time.

That's why I love her so much. You don't hear it. You don't get to hear the tea mug, but you hear the effects of it. You hear the fact that someone is comfortable at their kitchen table, not speaking from the position of an expert who has studied the thing, but just like someone who's remembering falling in love or gathering strawberries and their mom slapping them because they did something and their dad being carted off to the Gulag [under Stalin]. And then it's so different... than when you just read a book written about the Gulag. [In the latter] it always feels like these people had no lives before or after or outside of that.

When did you encounter her work for the first time?

I don't remember exactly when, but... I think I just saw the book at a bookstore... Now I've read pretty much everything by her. I mean, I get very emotional when I think about her. I don't know why there are not thousands of people doing what she does. I mean, not that anyone can do it as she does, everyone would do it in their different way, exactly as you're talking about, this specific alchemy.

But I am so interested in history because history is nothing but life, right? It's not different from now, it's just life that happened a little bit ago or a lot ago. And when people are able to capture that life with all of its texture, it's like an ode... It makes me appreciate actual life more, the one I'm living. I don't need a big arc. I don't need to do something important... And meaning is everywhere, if only you care to look or notice, pay attention.

Did reading her inform your approach to interviewing people?

I want to say yes, but I can't be sure that that's the correct cause and effect. I never thought about it practically. [Though] in the past few years I've been exchanging a lot of voice messages with friends. Some of them just because they don't live in New York and I can't see them. And when you have to come up with a time to call like, "Oh my god, no, I'm busy, and actually it's not a good time anymore," blah, blah. So we just record voice messages and send them and [they] are routinely like 30, 40 minutes long. And the beautiful thing about these is that you can notice the movements of someone's mind because you're not interrupting them, you're not asking follow-up questions. So they get to just jump from thing to thing. You can hear them free-associate. It's very moving because you get to know your friends in such a different way than if you would actually be with them and talk and interact. And that reminds me of [Svetlana]. She does ask questions, 100 percent, but I think she is silent a lot. I think she does do that thing where she asks one question and then just listens. And that is something that I'm learning to do. It's awkward. We don't like silence. Nobody likes silence, but they will fill it because they don't like it. So just zip it.

What else have you noticed over time, doing interviews?

The main thing that has changed is I have willed myself to be less afraid to ask really difficult questions. I was so terrified. Aren't we all? Because an interview is very much not like a normal conversation. You do things you would never do in a normal conversation, that would be considered rude and overstepping. And in an interview that is not out of the bounds of the expected or accepted.

I found it really hard, but I learned by listening to interviews that I'd done because I was transcribing them and editing them and being like, "Man, I left that on the table. Why did I decide for them that they probably wouldn't want to go there? Why?" And it made me think, how often do people get the gift of being listened to? Especially say, when a loved one died? People are so awkward around death that if your loved one died, people will be like, "Oh, I'm sorry, that's sad," for a few months. And then they expect you to get over it, and then they will not ask you about it anymore. To the extent that they ever did.

I remember I interviewed a poet [for *Poetry Off The Shelf*] whose dad died when she was really young, maybe she was seven or eight... And she has written so many books about the death of her father. So she's also interviewed about that a lot. And I asked her, "What was your dad like?" And she took a beat and she was like, "Nobody has ever asked me that." Can you believe it? This is not a very spectacular question. This is not my genius coming up with the smartest thing to say, but people do not ask each other the most basic stuff because they're afraid.

Now I know that I have to do it, and they want it, and I want it, and the listener wants it. And I tell them every time before the interview, "When I'm about to ask something hard, you are in charge. If you don't want to answer, you're good. If you want to... I have other questions." And I can't think of a single time where people have been like, "Can you take it out?" Sometimes they're like, "Can you leave out that one comment that I made about my dad?" But [not] the whole thing, no.

What to you is the purpose of creativity, or maybe your particular questions when it comes to it? It seems like in this case it's, "What is it like to be this person in this particular moment in time?" And maybe documenting something that would otherwise go unnoticed.

I'm less interested in the record-keeping part of it where it's like if you don't write it down, it will be gone forever. That of course is a big part of it. But what I'm interested in or what drives my curiosity is how does the world, the facts of the world, filter through each individual consciousness? What are the things that you specifically notice and get irritated about and get swoony about that [other people] don't notice and get obsessed about? And how do you metabolize it? That is what I'm interested in.

I am working on a kind of memoir project right now. It's the first time that I've done anything that is focused on me. It's very uncomfortable. I am so curious about other people, and I cannot do the same thing for me. So I have had friends interview me. I've done that so that I can sidestep that problem.

Is this Creation Myth?

Yes.

Are you done with the show?

Oh no. Oh man... It's going, but it's very, I don't want to say laborious. It's way too fun for that. I don't think I've ever had this much fun in my life.

What has made it so different?

One part of it is, you know how there's things that you always feel like you should or want to be doing, but for some reason you're not doing that? Because you don't feel ready. Because you feel like nobody's waiting for that or wants that. Because, yeah, something about it intimidates you, because you don't have the time, because of any number of things. But it's the thing that you want to make. It's the thing that is resting on your heart like a brick and whatever you do and however many cool projects you do, you're always like, "I'm not doing that thing."

And when am I ever going to do it? And can I even? Is this for me? Am I busy because then I have the valid excuse to not do the thing?"

And for me, doing the thing was always having my own project, a project that nobody asked for. Now I'm doing that.

[Something else] that is so much fun is I have an editor. I've never worked with an editor so the first meeting where I was supposed to share a thing, I was terrified. Like sweaty hands, racing heart. I felt like, "Now it's going to come out. Now she will know that all of the stuff that she thinks that I'm good at, I'm not. I'm a fraud." I was so terrified. And of course it was great. I trust her completely. I know that we both want the same thing, for the show to be good. And having someone who's not you but likes what you're doing, help you is such a relief for how my brain works. [She] looks at it and she's like, "This is great. This part was confusing. I think maybe we can start right there and cut that perfect part." [Or] "This is great. We can work with it." Whereas if I would be on my own, I would be like, "This is shit. I feel so ashamed that I did this. Why am I even bothering?" So that's another really, really, really fun thing that makes me feel more free to play.

Helena de Groot recommends:

[Secondhand Time](#) by Svetlana Alexievich (book)

[The Gleaners and I](#) by Agnes Varda (film)

[Aquanotes Waterproof Notes](#)

[Rumble Strip](#), a podcast hosted and produced by [Erica Heilman](#)

Long voice messages

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