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As told to Audrey Mardavich, 2482 words.

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On not shutting yourself down

Podcaster and screenwriter Sharon Mashihi on managing fear and self-doubt, saying yes to your wild ideas, and using rituals to break through creative blocks. **You said you've been working toward making your new podcast series Appearances your whole life. How have you been preparing and when was the moment you knew you needed it to make it?**

When I first started working on the podcast, I went through a couple of boxes of old papers. I realized that at some point in my early 20s, I had written an outline for a movie and I forgot about it. It was almost exactly Appearances. Even the characters' names were the same. I really had thought of it and then forgotten that I had thought of it. I guess in that sense, it probably has been on my mind for many, many years.

At a certain point, when I was lamenting to Kaitlin [Prest, Sharon's close friend and collaborator, creator of *The Heart* podcast] years ago about how I didn't feel actualized as an artist, she said, "What I think you need to do is find the voice of Sharon Mashihi and figure out how to share it with a mass audience." I wrote that down on two pink index cards that I still have and find every once in a while. When I made my first audio documentary, Man Choubam, I was like, "Oh, this is what that means." A lot of people heard it. It did feel like I was finding my particular language of how I make radio. It felt extremely personal, like only I could have made it.

I feel like it's only now that I'm at the point where I have enough facility with making radio that I could be the main author of a show like *Appearances*.

What does your daily practice look like?

Eight years ago, I read two books at the same time. One of them was *Writings* by the painter Agnes Martin. The year I read it, I read it like it was my bible. I read it and reread it and carried it around with me because I was still at that point where I was yearning to be an artist and still really had no idea how to practically work it into my days and move towards finishing something. That book was a lot about the psychological/spiritual space you have to inhabit if you want to make art.

Agnes Martin is really into asceticism. She's like, "I'm always a little bit hungry because if the artist is comfortable, that's the end." At the same time I was also reading David Lynch's autobiography *Catching the Big Fish*, about creativity and being an artist. He talks about the same thing; how it's important to have long blocks of time where you don't have any appointments, because it's not just the time you need to execute your idea, but the time to arrive at a mental space where you will have the clarity to know what the idea is.

Over the years, I've learned that my most important thinking isn't going to happen in front of a computer screen. I'm somebody when I go on walks or if I'm swimming or something, there's so much creative flow. On the dance floor, I'm a dance maniac. I think it just took so long to bring that dance floor energy to my art practice.

Walks are extremely helpful and I've started to write by speaking into my Notes app using dictation. I also like writing on really large pieces of paper and putting up signs about what I'm thinking about. I prefer handwriting to computers and I learned that for radio, I don't like to write a script in advance. I'll cull from written-down notes and improvise them into my microphone.

I also read a lot of self-help art stuff. I think Elizabeth Gilbert talked about how you really have to be careful about saying no to yourself, versus saying yes to yourself. Because if you say no to yourself, then the ideas are going to be like, "Oh, well, you keep rejecting me. I'm not going to show up for you because every time I do, you say no." I have a lot of self-hatred, a lot of fear, a lot of self-criticism. I'm just really trying not to shut myself down.

I think what would happen before, is I would have an inspiration and be like, "That has nothing to do with what you're trying to do. No." Now, the more I say yes, the more I find that productive ideas come to me and I'm not going to judge them at the outset. But I have to say that, besides intentionally being more nurturing to myself as an artist, the biggest reason I was able to pull off making *Appearances* was that I got paid full time for a year to make it. I also had two artists' residencies and had all day every day for a long time.

So the residencies were really important for giving you that space and time...

Yeah. Also, it had to do with recognizing that even though this is my full-time job, I'll do a better job if I'm not rigid about full-time hours. I work six days a week, but I will do lots of things that are tangential to the work during that time and I try not to beat myself up about it. I'm in a self-help program where planning and keeping a record of your time are really important. When I was reading Agnes Martin and David Lynch, they were all about the four-hour work block or the all-day work block. I tried doing that for a long time, but I realized that I need to do hour and a half blocks. I'll do four separate hour and a half blocks in a day of creative work, if I can. When each hour and a half block ends, I try to set myself up with my plan for the next hour and a half, so that when I sit down I have a general game plan.

You're part of Mermaid Palace, an audio art company, and you've been working with audio maker Kaitlin Prest for a very long time. What role does collaboration play for you in your art making?

It's funny, I'm sometimes very anti-collaboration actually. I have this phrase that I've been saying for like 15 years which is, "Collaboration is the dilution of good ideas." Many times in my life when I've collaborated with other people, I've felt that every creative choice became a compromise. I realized I collaborate best if I'm someone's editor or support person helping them bring their idea to fruition. I think Kaitlin and I are both on the same page about this. We take turns being the primary author and the support person. Sometimes I'm making something and she's my editor. Sometimes she's making something and I'm her editor.

I love being an editor. I love helping other people make their thing happen. In my 20s, I had some sadness that I was always helping other people realize their visions because I wondered, "When am I going to make something?" Now that I have had some experience, I feel like I have endless capacity to be a support person because I don't have that feeling of, "What am I?"

What are the most pleasurable parts of making audio and how do you balance that with the less pleasurable parts?

When I first started working on *Appearances* in the beginning, we thought that it was going to be performed by actors and I felt jealous because I wanted to be the one living inside the world of the show. But then we decided that I would play most of the characters and it was really fulfilling because I got to very greedily, hungrily, do it all. I always wanted to be an actor and I did acting a lot in high school. So this time I got to be an actor and I got to invent only words that worked for me. When I'm at my own computer doing this, I have a mic. I can read the same line 15 times. Listen to all the takes. Hear what I'm doing wrong. Do it again. Hear what I'm doing wrong. Do it again. Get the rhythms all right and cut it as I'm doing it.

I do happen to take pleasure in all the parts of making audio. I love audio editing and cutting two-way interviews. I can't believe that I get paid to do that because to me, it's like playing a video game. I love it so much. I do crossword puzzles in my spare time and it uses the same part of the brain.

You've talked about making rituals for yourself and for your friends, and that friends have made rituals for you. What role does ritual play in your work?

I find that rituals help calm me down, quiet my mind, and get to clarity. The ritual that was at the center of working on *Appearances* is a ritual that my friend Georgia made for me. She's an entrepreneur and started a business called The Ceremonialist. At a certain point in working on the show, I was having so much anxiety, so I hired her to meet with me and help me figure out a ritual. We honed in on a few things.

The first was how much I want to have a child. It was the main thing that seemed to be on my mind and I was tying the success of this podcast to whether or not I could be a mother. I felt like, "If I don't finish it and it isn't successful, then I can't be a mom because making a successful show is part of my plan of how I'm going to be a mom."

I was also concerned about my own mother and whether the show was going to harm her. This was an obsessed thought that was really shutting me down. Georgia came up with this three-part ritual that was honoring my own mother and recognizing that I honor my mother and that nothing I do is intended to harm her, how much I love her and how much loving my mother is part of the path towards me having a child. Then the third part was about honoring the making of the art, and that it's none of my business who likes it and who doesn't like it. The art is the art and by honoring the art and honoring my mother, I'm also honoring my

future child and these three things being honored will help each other grow, and they are in no way in opposition to each other.

This ritual involved a few prayers that Georgia and I wrote together by her giving me prompts with three corresponding objects.

You've taught and participated in The School of Making Thinking. Could you tell us more about the school?

It's somewhere between an artist residency and a school and there are classes with readings and difficult academic texts that I never really understood. Actually, a lot of my figuring out that I was going to be an artist was that first year at The School of Making Thinking. I had just gone to Salt [School for Documentary Studies]. The semester ended and I went right to The School of Making Thinking. I was curious about story structure because I had a background in screenwriting and I wanted to know how story structure worked in audio.

In that environment, people are really, really supportive and everyone is working on their own project and the voices of criticism really quiet down. One of the mainstays of The School of Making Thinking is structured walks. You get paired with someone and you show up with a question that you're stumbling through. You walk outside away from the residence for 45 minutes, talking about your question and the other person responds, helping you work it out. That's all you're talking about. Then on the way back, it's their turn and it's their question you're engaging with while walking back. Those walks were tremendously helpful.

Are there any things you learned there that you still do regularly in your practice?

Doing rituals in my adult life really started there. Even the day the trailer dropped for *Appearances*. I was like, "I have to acknowledge this in some way. I can't pretend it didn't happen." I was in Canada at the time. I went to Lake Ontario with a bag of different things and all I had was an hour available because I still wasn't completely finished with the show, so I had to do something quick. I lit a candle that kept going out because of the wind and I folded a piece of paper and wrote a prayer in real time. I feel like that kind of thing is the definition for me of having a relationship with myself. I struggle with courage and permission around being an artist. If I didn't have that kind relationship with myself, nothing would happen.

Sharon Mashihi recommends:

This very short music track that is more than music, it is a moment of wild fantasticness that I revisit often. Found for me by the ever-remarkable Spotify taste algorithm. Off the album Orff-Schulwerk, Vol.1: Musica Poetica by Carl Orff and the Karl Penkofer Percussion Ensemble.

Suzan Lori Parks I have gotten to see a few of her plays in New York, but even more exciting, I have heard her speak, and every time I see her speak (live or on video) I become excited all over again to make art - honestly, I become excited again to be a human.

This Longform interview with Latif Nasser. Longform is one of my very favorite podcasts. I think they do some of the best interviews about writing and process and journalism that I've ever heard anywhere. Last night, I listened to their episode with Latif Nasser, newly minted co-host of Radiolab. I find the way Latif views the world to be so poetic. The interview made me cry.

A Married Couple, the 1969 Alan King documentary. This is one of my favorite documentaries of all time. It was a big influence for the second episode of *Appearances*.

Taryn Simon's installation, "An Occupation of Loss." One of my favorite art experiences of the last five years was when I went to see this at the Park Avenue Armory in 2016. I feel weird linking to this article because reading about this work does not capture what it was like to experience it, but maybe it will be resurrected some day, or maybe it's worth just knowing about it.

Name

Sharon Mashihi


Vocation


Audio artist and screenwriter

Fact

Sam Massey

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