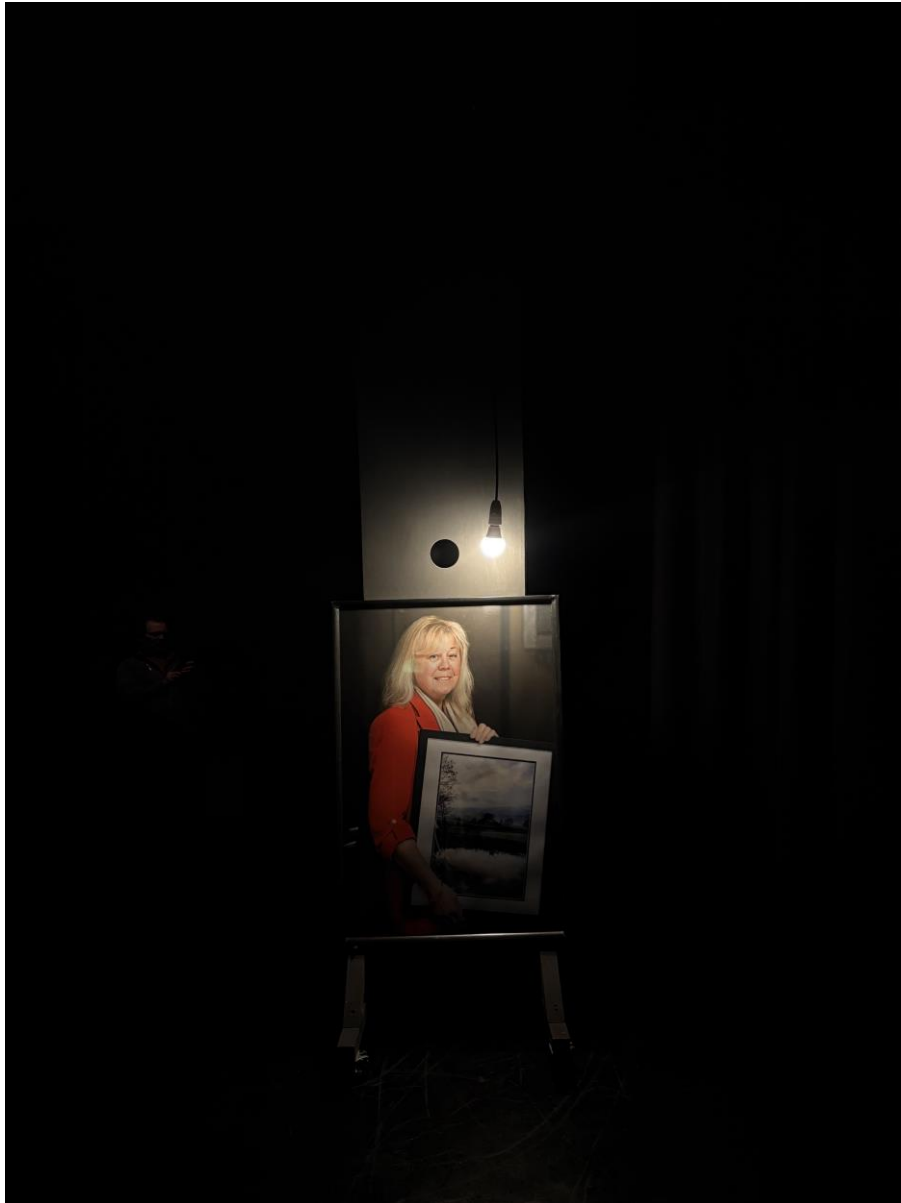


Eight voices in Darkness

An installation by Dr Claire Nollett and Richard Bowers

Presentation to Wales Eyecare Conference 2025



Claire and I approached this project in two halves - I would say - broadly speaking - a Claire half and a Richard half - an artwork that creates problems for me to resolve into a viable art installation; and a didactic element in the form of a video for training and awareness raising, to encourage discussion of the problems that the installation deliberately raises, but doesn't solve.

The voices of people with lived experience, in all sorts of domains, are of primary importance today- they provide primary data - and thankfully are being heard and listened to by those who are in the job of effecting change in services that have an impact on those people's lives. So, when I thought about how I would approach the difficult theme of this project - the impact of losing sight on one's mental health - I confess that I came at it with my preconceptions of how I would transform the materials - the data, we might say - into an aesthetic form. What I mean is, I formed my own mental image of the work prematurely. You have to start *somewhere* after all. But - and this is because I am not a conceptual artist; I'm not an artist who forms the whole work from an idea alone - the work transformed over time into something more authentic by my withdrawal from the shaping of its primary content. I discovered very quickly when working with the materials, that the eight interviewees should speak for themselves.

My *usual* approach would be to intervene in the sounds and images to shape them into something unified and coherent - or incoherent sometimes - as an art object. I was quickly diverted from working in this way having *actually listened* to the voices in the recordings, and having *actually looked* at the photographs. I felt they were not malleable materials like clay or paint. So, we have here an instance where the data - if I may so crudely call these frank and open testimonies 'data' - should be revealed as *directly* as possible and should shape the work, not the other way around.

So, in this way the installation turned out to be more raw in character than I could have deliberately engineered myself, because the stories as they emerged in Claire's recordings had *authenticity*. People seemed to ignore the microphone and speak freely. That was evident to me when I listened closely, and it encouraged me to move the work towards some idea of truth.

The installation is situated in a cinema. There is an oft-quoted saying in film studies, attributed to the filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard, but actually

spoken by one of his characters: *photography is truth; the cinema is truth 24 times per second.*

I've been reading a book by the film and sound editor, Walter Murch. He says something that I'd never considered before. Film in the cinema, before its digital replacement, was a long strip of celluloid - thousands of metres - with hundreds of thousands of photographs along its length. This strip of film is passed through the projector - 24 pictures each second - between a light bulb and a lens. The photographs are projected onto a cinema screen. But, so that we don't just see an unintelligible blur of streaky colour, a shutter blocks out the light, the film is stopped, the shutter moves away allowing the light to pass through the stationary film, then the shutter comes back to block out the light again, and the film moves along to the next photograph and stops. And this happens again and again - 24 times per second.

So, Walter Murch tells us that in between the periods of bright images there is darkness - the shadow of the shutter. In the course of a two-hour film, we have about an hour of darkness. Our brains ignore the darkness and fill it with the memory of the preceding bright, still image - thereby glueing all of these tens of thousands of photographs together into a continuous moving image. An illusion of movement.

Moving images are seductive. When I use video in my work I try to use it judiciously, because I believe moving images stop us thinking. I believe they energise primordial responses in us - put us on the alert, so to speak - or lull us into a soporific state. Either way, they kill reflective thinking. These effects can be exploited, of course, as they are in the cinema, but for this present project I felt that the static images - the photographs by Ian and the others - were sufficient as placeholders for the voices. Instead of sugar-coating the voices by adding moving images - which I did experiment with - I put my faith ultimately in the directness of the speech and the pure functionality of the photographic portraits.

So, imagine taking that strip of film - eight frames of it - eight portraits - and allowing each frame to be illuminated in turn - wrapped in ten to twenty seconds of darkness. Each still photograph revealed to us, not for one twenty-fourth of a second, but for a minute or two, while the voices tell their unique stories - unvarnished. Imagine a frozen and exploded short strip of film - each frame arranged on stage like characters in a play. That's Eight Voices in Darkness; it's in a cinema, but don't expect a movie.

So, my ethical problem concerning representation, has been resolved, I feel, by presenting the data with a minimum of intervention. The eight portraits, framed as they are in shutters of darkness and silence, address the viewer, the listener, provoking, I hope, *thought*.



And I shall give the last word to Lee who suffers with Charles Bonnet syndrome. I say 'suffers' - a very medical model term - because by his own testimony he truly suffers as he lives his life in an endless psychedelic movie, in which he hopes for the darkness of the shutter. He says:

What my wonderful brain has gone and done to me is just produced lots of swirly patterns that swirl in front of my eyes constantly. It looks like it's in front of me and sometimes I have - particularly at night time - a thick band of very bright light in front of my eyes and everything swirls on either side of this thick band of light. I can't sleep because of it sometimes, because things are just too bright ... so I wish I did live in total darkness.



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