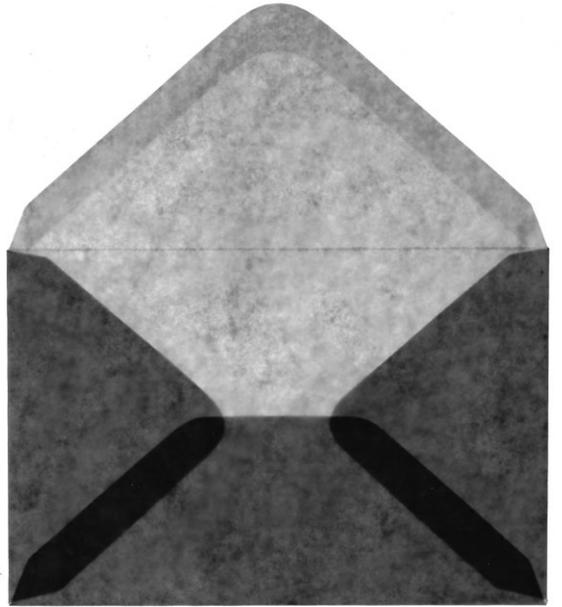


Becky Beasley



Claire Scanlon



i got another letter today. i immediately put it in the box
with all the others. my excitement grows with the pile of
unopened possibilities.

#3 Becky Beasley in conversation with
Claire Scanlon

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Edited by Adam Gibbons and Eva Wilson

CLAIRE SCANLON: The first question I have for you came about because the last time we spoke you used this word, superpowers. You said that you were recovering your superpowers and I wondered what you meant by that. I thought about John Cage rewriting the responsibility of the artist as 'response-ability', and whether this had something to do with your superpowers. One of my favourite quotes from Walter Benjamin is about this idea. He puts it brilliantly of course: 'Presence of mind is an extract of the future' [*One-Way Street*, 1928]. I take this to mean that the only superpower you need is not to be a fortune-teller, but simply to try and be fully present in the moment. Might that be one aspect of your superpowers or understanding of what an artist must do?

BECKY BEASLEY: Certainly, but it's more that I am interested in all aspects of life as they relate to practice. My recent comments about superpowers are mainly to do with the aftermath of having had a child and perinatal depression. Let's read the next question and then we can elaborate.

SCANLON: It's quite formally written. 'Anyone who practices over a long period of time will have a sense that involves a number of constants.' You know, what Victor Burgin refers to as 'components of a practice'. How would you describe these

at the moment and have you found or lost any along the way?

BEASLEY: In the context of those two questions then, I am thinking about a feeling of a usefulness and urgency around this text that we are working on. In a bigger sense I was thinking about framing this dialogue around themes of time, fragments, and limitations. Specifically, for me, my constants of practice would relate to mental health, parenthood, teaching, space and time, money, all of these personal issues. They come ahead of all the other specificities.

In response to the questions, I think there's a specific issue around happiness. Maternally, they relate to the post-birth and early years: the initial hormonal support from the oxytocin, my experience of my brain, of a different understanding of speed, and also of love and powerlessness. Finally, depression and a slow movement towards some kind of relationship to happiness through work, changing the work at key personal moments, and always asking some new questions of my work and my relationship to photography. Making art has been my lifeline and constant ambition on a daily basis.

So, I'm interested here in questions around adversity and difficulty. Anybody

can relate to them. People have always responded strongly when I've talked publicly about limitations in relation to specific works. These are always the questions that return. So I've written down here: 'Superpowers relate to optimism, fought out of chaos'. [Laughs]

SCANLON: [Laughs] Right.

BEASLEY: 'Components of practice' ... So, my components of practice are: depression, time, space, money, reading, and a fascination with images as a result of these. Earlier on, films were also very important, and live performance, dance, and experimental theatre. And then in my notes I added pacing and diary. I've learnt to be very practical!

SCANLON: That's surprising. I wouldn't have identified half of what you've suggested are the components of your practice.

BEASLEY: Well, your questions got me thinking about it, so I'm talking about a really muddy, core base of where a practice comes from in relation to time, fragments, and limitations. The actual conditions out of which art emerges are always interesting to me.

SCANLON: Putting those things together makes for quite an interesting equation, doesn't it?

BEASLEY: I think they relate very specifically to both questions and I think they're fundamentally useful things.

SCANLON: What? Limitations?

BEASLEY: Yes, as a base from which our conversation can stem. I think they include everything, as far as I understand, that we might want to talk about.

SCANLON: Shall we talk about limitations then?

BEASLEY: Parenthood, I think, is interesting in relation to time, experience, and the force of possibilities. Mental health is about ongoing restrictions, an additional mountainous terrain, but also the gift of all of these things. It's all shared territory, so long as you don't die, of course. That's very final. I've managed to survive so far, but there have been multiple occasions when I almost didn't.

SCANLON: That is hard to hear. Is that why knowing your limitations is a crucial point of departure?

BEASLEY: So you can throw yourself over them, in a fashion, and ask questions in relation to them. Certainly becoming more aware over time of where the line is has been a part of growing up with depression.

These days I am eminently able, apart from when I get overtired and then I come under fire. Then I don't have much defence. That's a very vulnerable moment for me – it is dangerous in fact – so I try my best to avoid that. The only thing I can really do about that is to rest when I can. So I try not to get overtired.

This is the main reason why the years since we had our son have been so tough. Time for rest vanished, so as a result I've been constantly extremely vulnerable. I know that many women experience the same in their own way. I didn't give up work, because I couldn't. I'm finally resting again now, in part as the result of receiving the Paul Hamlyn Award.

SCANLON: Well, see, where you would throw yourself over limitations, I would breathe my way through them. Though I agree, sometimes the only way is to throw yourself over them, or into them.

BEASLEY: I think that's how it happens for me. That's the superpower, that's the force.

SCANLON: I think the way out of it, for me, was to find someone else to play with. Through collaboration you share your weaknesses and your strengths and find ways of overcoming the things that you perceive as deficits in yourself. My

particular weakness is the incapacity to act quickly. I have to mull things over, but my partner Paul [Grivell] is very good at seizing the day, so we complement each other's modus operandi beautifully.

Even if you work on your own it's necessary to recognise your weaknesses, don't you think? Because that's where you find your edges and a point of resistance. And resistance is fertile, as they say, because that's where you know you need to do the work.

BEASLEY: Indeed, knowing where to do the work is a great way to put it. Earlier, for me it was all very destructive, from not understanding depression and from drink, but now it is more creative in terms of being on the side of life. It's more generous and I have had the chance at my own version of happiness.

SCANLON: With the same degree of momentum?

BEASLEY: Yes. You make an impossible proposal to yourself and then you go out, you get on and find out how to do it. It all happens in relation to economic possibilities. The restraints produce a necessity to think imaginatively.

SCANLON: A proposal does suppose an order of things, doesn't it? For me, it begins with a gesture which creates momentum.

In making a gesture, you are then bound to follow it.

BEASLEY: What's the gesture for you?

SCANLON: I'm thinking about it in relation to drawing. Funnily enough, I've just been reading Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Pleasure in Drawing* [2013]. Do you know it? It's an extraordinary book. The last chapter is called 'The Line's Desire' and it's very much about the energy that is in that first mark which is without intention. He's not talking about intentionality, he's simply talking about the gesture of making a mark.

You talk about throwing yourself over the limitation, whereas I think in terms of being able to make that first mark, being able to make that gesture without knowing where it will lead. But you're suggesting that you've made a proposition to yourself and then you have to find a way of realising it. How formed is the proposition in your mind?

BEASLEY: It's not about anything formed. It's about knowing that if the force of that wildness doesn't go behind whatever it is you're going to do next, it'll at best be ok, or it won't happen, or at worst, it'll be average. I'm being quite abstract in that I'm talking about trying to do and make something that, for you, is the best you can do against

the odds, in that space of resistance you described earlier.

SCANLON: Against the odds?

BEASLEY: The odds of depression are a constant component of practice. You are producing energy despite the condition of a force that wants you not to be doing anything ambitious. I've harnessed that strange energy all my working life, my adult life, rather than not doing anything with it. Not that almost anybody really understands that. I think people only see the output, rather than that it always comes out of the question of how you even begin. And the beginning's already being sucked away, being sucked down, out of you. How do you then turn that into this huge force necessary to, for example, make a show, or get out of bed in the morning?

SCANLON: What you seem to be describing is an extraordinary willpower or commitment to the proposal. If you were to understand the idea of depression literally, as being in a hole (I remember now that's something that you've written about), it makes me think of the sheer effort required to climb your way to the edge before you can even get out and run.

BEASLEY: Yes, that is a very good image. Someone once described it to me as 'the opposite of effort'. It's not necessarily

willpower. Superpowers fit better here, perhaps.

SCANLON: I know that – certainly in the last few years – the question of mental health has become very critical in art schools. I'm encountering more and more students with mental health issues. It's curious, because if it's self-declared, there is an expectation that the activity that they've come to learn about is a therapeutic one.

BEASLEY: Urgh. Really?

SCANLON: Well, in that it's recognised as something that they're doing in order to manage mental health. Unfortunately, often, it's put forward as a way of not doing the thing that they've come to do, rather than the opposite – that making work may be a way through depression.

BEASLEY: Getting to that point is amazing to me. I guess there's an opposite end of the spectrum – some kind of romantic appreciation of the melancholic artist – to the point where going to art school with depression is about therapy, not about pure creativity. That doesn't seem helpful to me. It's certainly not how I approach my students who are struggling. Mental health issues set one apart from others and that is, eventually, empowering – at least in my own version of this. Survival sets one apart.

SCANLON: I think there's ultimately a misalignment of expectations. Perhaps the mental health problems may not be depression as you describe it. More a form of anxiety, which is also isolating.

BEASLEY: Right.

SCANLON: So do you agree that making art is a way of managing? From day to day.

BEASLEY: There's a practical side to it; a set of tools. There is also the fight and the societal aspect. In twenty-five plus years, I've not seen any change of how people respond to me when I'm not well. I think people still want to stay away from depression. So they do something to push it away when there's something wrong. It's the same with death and dying.

SCANLON: Yes. We're very bad at that, aren't we?

BEASLEY: People often are. I grew up with a nurse and a doctor as parents so I had a formative experience to do with what work is for. My mum is most happy caring for someone who's dying. There is a Thomas Bernhard novel, *Wittgenstein's Nephew* [1982], in which the narrator describes not going to see his friend and why in the end it was ok not to go, because it was death and he didn't want

to. I had a friend who was dying of emphysema and I used to go often; it was hard, I was living abroad at the time so it was all part of the complexity of travelling and time. But I just always went, I always went. And then I remember this one time when I got to London and went and sat in a café and read my Thomas Bernhard instead of going to see him.

And then he died. So this was the last time I would have gone to see him. It was a very strange coincidence and it sounds almost too good to be true, but I was reading Bernhard at the time and it explained to me why I hadn't gone, despite the fact that it wasn't easy to go. I never questioned that I would go. It was kind of disgusting there, at this place. It actually made me physically sick, the environment he was living in, but I never thought not to go. And this one time I didn't. It never occurred to me that that's what people do.

SCANLON: But you got half way.

BEASLEY: Yeah, that's true.

SCANLON: Wisdom takes courage. What you're describing is that people are not courageous, they are cowards and cowardice deprives us of response-ability.

BEASLEY: It depends on your own sense of responsibility to others, really. Everyone

has their own formative experience. Survivors are always courageous though, in my experience. I'm only really interested in speaking to those who understand themselves from an excluded position.

SCANLON: Yes. But in that state where you're needing support, and what you see is other people's weakness, that's their problem, in a sense. And because you're vulnerable, you're also seeing them as inadequate.

BEASLEY: Well, that's the journey: to get to the point where that's ok. It's an ethical decision, really, isn't it? What kind of person do I want to be, and, given the choices I make, can I live with them? I'm only slowly, slowly coming to terms with those things. You're seeing the wake of what you have done and you've done some things you're really proud of. The main one being having managed it at all. But it's a very long journey.

SCANLON: Despite being able to recognise your achievements and taking comfort in them, nothing touches that issue of depression, does it?

BEASLEY: No, no. It's like reading, nobody else understands it either, and no one will believe you, because you went to art school and then you were able to follow through, and it wasn't therapy. [Laughs]

SCANLON: It was for real.

BEASLEY: It was your life, and it was what kept you going, in fact.

SCANLON: I brought my copy of Maurice Blanchot's *The Madness of the Day* [1973], translated by Lydia Davis. I thought it would remind us of our beginnings.

BEASLEY: 'I have known joy.' You introducing me to Blanchot at college in 1995 was so vital. When I was working on my book, *Thomas Bernard Malamud* [2009], my former gallerist Laura Bartlett gave me a copy of a short essay by Lydia Davis on the problems of summarising Blanchot. Davis was asked to write the blurb for the back of one of her translations. The essay [in Lydia Davis, *Proust, Blanchot and a Woman in Red*, 2007] is her working through of the problem of writing the blurb for the back of a Blanchot book. Essentially she is saying that to do this one would have to print the Blanchot text itself, at a one to one scale, so to speak. This difficulty is one of the fundamental aspects in my relationship to Blanchot. It's the correlation between absolute clarity or precision and essential ambiguity.

I had the idea in bed one morning while working on my book that I wanted to republish Davis's essay right in the middle of my book, without really