

Recording Justine

The director asked me if I'd like to record sound for his documentary and then explained that the person it centred on, wasn't really verbal - which clearly raised some issues for us as filmmakers. How could the director construct a narrative, how could the recordist present a full audio picture of the main contributor, Justine?

As a group we sometimes refer to "giving a voice" to the under-represented, or of "being heard" - but how do you best represent someone in a documentary portrait who communicates in ways other than speech?

The Project Art Works brief was to create a portrait of a young person with complex needs for a series In Transit, "a project that helps young people with complex needs by creating a rounded film portrait with which to broker relevant opportunities in their adult lives". When the film was completed it was used at a social services review for support for the family, and for me, this part of the process was the most important function of the film.

The effect of the Project Art Work ethos of collaboration, of listening, mutual respect and sensitivity informed our working process. It magnified the need for a heightened responsivity to cues both from the director and from Justine, and from those around her. During the filming we'd also often stop, and just be present together in the same room or place. There would be the sense of creating a listening space, of an alignment. We learnt that Justine had developed some vocabulary and some signing and by being attentive to her it became easier to "hear" her and respond to her. Also the range of Justine's vocal expression was big - from silence to very loud - so that was a challenge to record, and so I had to use some limiter in an effort not to distort the recording.

The ubiquity of video in all our lives makes watching it a common experience but it can be daunting for anyone to have a crew following you and pointing equipment at you yet overall I felt that Justine tolerated our presence well. She had met Pratap before we starting filming and was always informed about our arrival. I think that having made a pop video at school with the other students may have also prepared her, and she was a teenager after all and like a typical teenager loves music. She particularly liked ABBA, and my heart sank somewhat at the thought of trying to clear its use for the film. But I tracked down the publishers that covered the UK and Ireland rights and miraculously managed to get the OK from Benny, Bjorn and Stig Anderson who co-wrote that massive hit "Mamma Mia".

As we saw, outside home Justine liked to be on the sidelines, often to hover as an observer, and also found out that she doesn't like to be touched. That meant we weren't able to use a personal mic, and that we would boom the mic when we were accompanying her around. If we were seated in a room together I could take the mic off the boom and hand hold, or try to keep the boom parallel to the floor. I avoided holding it over Justine as much as possible and would sometimes point the boom down and the mic up, or point the mic underneath her eye line.

When you have a microphone on a boom with a fluffy, a recorder and you are wearing microphones you have both a literal and a metaphorical distance or barrier between you and the person you are recording - not as much as a camera - but nevertheless, there is a separation between you. Yet although you are separate, for the recordist listening as you record has an intimate dimension. In real life you usually only hear a person that closely if someone sits next to you and talks into your ear. So when Justine did upon occasion speak it was very powerful - as equally as her silences were. When she signed and said "Happy" while getting out of the car, it was a strong experience for me.