

The World's a Mess and Yr My Only Cure #2

I like how you begin the 'about me' section of your website as mentioning you are one of many Charlotte Coopers in the world but when I Googled your name, you were the first entry for your site, then second for your blog. The lass from The Subways pictures are around but she doesn't get a look in. You are THE Charlotte Cooper in Google's eyes. You once made a zine called 'We Are The Charlotte Cooper' about a bunch of folks sharing the same name which sounds amazing, I wanna know all about YOU, what's your story...?

Haha! I'm happy to hear that Google is still my bitch. Long live my metadata.

Ok, I've got lots of stories about who I am, because I've got fingers in a lot of pies, so the stories vary depending on the context, and they change as time goes on. But here are some things that might make me relevant to people reading this zine.

I'm 41 years old, white, I come from a complicated working class background, I'm fat, queer, Poly and, er, kinky! I'm a woman, and British, and ambivalent about both of those things. I've lived in East London for about 15 years and have no plans ever to move. Half my bio-family died when I was a teenager, a defining point in my life. I've got a lot of higher education, and in 2012 I'll have a PhD, which means that I know how to write an essay and can handle the use of 'poststructuralism' in a sentence. I'm an atheist and my politics veer towards anarchism. I think of the world as crazy, chaotic, in constant flux, and random, where the flow of power is often senseless. I think that life is basically without meaning or purpose but I try to live by Kate Bornstein's tenet: "Don't be mean." I look for help in not being an arsehole from my friends, various communities and schools of thought, and people who are very different to me. Might as well have good sweet times in our short fragile lives, which we live in trying circumstances, and do the best we can towards other people, eh?

I've been writing for most of my life, it's how I communicate best, and pretty much everything I do begins as text in some way, from a 100,000 word thesis to a shopping list. I started out keeping notebooks and diaries when I was very young, and this turned into autobiographical writing, lots of letter writing and pen pals, writing for other people's zines, making zines of my own, writing books and chapters for books, being a journalist, making websites, and blogging – roughly in that order. So I've made my living writing, and it's also a foundation for my identity and my political and creative practice. Despite all this I've tended to resist calling myself 'A Writer' because I think it's somewhat pompous, and it implies a commitment to lyrical craft, or professionalism, which I don't have or value in my own work. I don't know if there are any words to describe who I am, I feel pretty uncontainable by language, English anyway.

I won a scholarship in 2008 to do a PhD at the University of Limerick about fat activism. Lately my writing has taken a very dry turn because I am interested in getting some academic articles and books published. This is not my favourite kind of work, it's a total pain actually, I don't think this kind of writing is any more legitimate

than other stuff that I do, but it gets noted and cited, and assimilated into apparently respectable academic knowledge. It means that I get my ego stroked, and sometimes I get invited to do interesting things as a result, so that's why I do it.

Sometimes I perform my writing. I'm a big show-off and I love to work a crowd. In my academic life I give a lot of speeches and presentations, which I enjoy. But I really love hearing the kinds of stories that expose the real shit in our lives, stories that have a sense of realness and humanity about them, badassery too. I can't really explain it better than that but I find these kinds of stories intensely life-affirming. I was inspired to do readings when I saw Sister Spit perform at Dirty Bird, which was a queercore festival in San Francisco in 1996 (I spent the advance from my first book on a ticket there). Over the years I've done quite a lot. In 2009 Sister Spit did a show in London – organised by you! – and Michelle Tea, whom I adore with every fibre of my being, asked me to perform. I got a big cheer when I took to the stage, Beth Ditto was in town and lent me her phone to read my stuff from my website. It was one of the happiest and most satisfying moments of my creative life, and so amazing to be recognised by that crowd. Full circle.

I like to make films too. I have no training and my aesthetic is very lo-fi because I don't know any better. I use a camcorder and put things together on my computer at home. Some of my work has been shown at film festivals, and some is online. I'd like to develop this more in the future. I have an occasional video blog:
<http://charlottecooper.blip.tv/>

Sometimes I do workshops on fat stuff, or zines, or counselling. Whatever anyone wants that I know something about. I love this kind of work, talking about things together, making things collaboratively, working things out.

Oh yeah, and I've been in a few bands, like The Lesbian and Gay Community, and The 123s. All shamelessly shambolic.

And sex and friendships and relationships too, I don't know what to say about that here, other than that queer sexuality is pretty central to how I live.

You're a trained psychotherapist/counsellor as well as a journalist, writer and you are prolific in the DIY scene with involvements in projects such as 3AM, The Chubsters, LadyFest, Ladies Rock! and Girls Rock! The Queer Storytelling Festival, Queeruption and Transfabulous. Can you gush about DIY lifestyle, culture and community and the importance of this to you personally?

Yep. Some of these things are defunct. I don't make my living as a journalist any more either, but I may dabble in the future and I'm still a union member.

When I was about 11 or 12 years old, I got given a big box of paper and I made a newspaper out of it. There was only ever one issue, all handwritten and illustrated by me. I think this is the first time that I understood that media doesn't just happen, it's made by people, and I might make it too. I was pretty disenfranchised though, so

had no idea how to go about working in mainstream media. This turned out to be a blessing.

A couple of years later, in the early 1980s, I snagged a job as a Saturday girl at The Spastics Society, a charity shop in Wembley not far from where I lived. A couple of amazing people managed the shop, and through them I met a crowd, including many queers and some trans people, who had been involved in the punk scene in London and New York in the 1970s, who were infamous and very central to it. I started reading zines around this time, got into feminism, went to see bands all the time, and started going to clubs. I never stopped doing that. All of this gave me more of an idea of DIY as a way of life, and an enduring appreciation of subcultural existence. Later, I went to Uni and was involved with people who did performance type things on no budget, and I started to meet queers my age. Soon after that I met someone and started making comics and zines of my own. Then I really got the bug and have kept going since.

I can't overstate how vital DIY has been to my life. I think I would kill myself if I thought that cultural production was limited only to experts, through 'proper' channels. A lot of people think that this is how it is and should be. The rawness of DIY is what makes life worth living, it's about expressing ideas as directly as you can, in ways that are meaningful to you, and mostly unfettered by corporate interests. And anyone can do this, in theory. A fundamental value is that we all have something beautiful and good to express, and by doing so we can create community. I think that's amazing. When it works it's like waking up to incredible possibility, it's hope. Of course many DIY culture things are a bit crap, not everything can be great, but it doesn't matter, mistakes are allowed. What's important to me is the idea of being conscious of your place in the world, the way that power impacts on you, your sense of agency, and your ability to connect with others through your own bloody gorgeous creativity. Stay awake through life, snooze later.

Since I saw you read as part of Sister Spit: The Next Generation in September '09, I became a big fan of your work, your style of writing is so inspiring and funny and ticks my favourite box of being super positive, can you tell me about your motivation and what drives you to produce so many zines, essays and blog entries. How important and rewarding is this in your life?

Wow, thanks, that's a big compliment. god.

I guess I'm prolific because I think that I've got something to say that people might want to hear and, although I am devilish in many ways, I have a basic need to be helpful – I'm a good girl! I don't feel automatically entitled to speak at all times, so I struggle with when to open my mouth and when to keep silent, I think this is a good girl trait too, though I'm getting better at it. Basically, I love my life and I like to share it with consenting people.

I've got a large body of work behind me partly because I have a strong work ethic, and partly because I'm getting older and have been around for a long time. It's weird

talking about a work ethic, but it is about work and not letting my short precious life pass me by, this stuff doesn't just happen, I'm really driven to make things. I'm super-aware of my mortality, and have no intention ever to have kids, so perhaps it's about asserting my presence on the planet. I don't think anything I do will remain for very long after I die. I'm archiving my work but am under no illusion that it'll mean anything in the long term, or that people of the future will understand or interpret it in a way that means anything to me, but I'll be long gone. Things come and go. I suppose I do what I do because it makes me happy, it feels right, it's about making a bit of space for myself, and it's approximately ten zillion times better than not making and doing things.

'I am fat. I write and think about what it is to be fat. I wrote a book about fat. I am doing a Ph.D about fat. Fat is a big part of my life.' Can you tell us more about the fat liberation movement and your involvement in projects, writing and activism within this area to help inspire others.

Jeez, how to condense this big big stuff into a couple of paragraphs? Aiiiee.

I got into fat politics at the end of the 80s. A very old skool book called *Shadow On a Tightrope* politicised me around my own fatness, as did a bunch of fat activists working in London at that time, and Shelley Bovey's writing, though I'm somewhat critical of her work nowadays. I did some fat activism in the early 90s, and an MA, which formed the basis of my first book, *Fat & Proud: The Politics of Size*. I also wrote for and fell in love with *FaT GiRL* zine, which changed my life. I got burned out during the horrible publishing process around my book and became less vocal for a while. But people didn't leave me, they read my work and wrote to me and sent me fan mail, all of which was amazingly encouraging. By about 2002 I started to think about fat seriously again.

My fat activism today involves things like giving speeches, doing research, writing and publishing things, letter-writing, attending meetings and conferences, having riotous good times with my girl gang, *The Chubsters*, and a lot of talking and thinking. I am proud to be a fat dyke, part of a fat lib community that stretches back over 40 years, and I guess that moving through the world with such a sensibility is also a form of activism.

I'm really interested in the early fat rights movement. The people who started it are still around, though some are very old and frail now. I've been lucky enough to meet many of them, and to work with them. They are my heroes. Many early rad fatties were dykes, and it's amazing to see how their powerful analyses of hatred and resistance have developed over the years, in some cases becoming quite mainstream, yet also finding a foothold in punk, third wave feminist and DIY cultures. Good stuff! I'm also fascinated by the people who uphold fatphobia, the business aspects of the war on obesity. I have some training in Peace Studies and I'm interested in using that framework to strategise within the current moral panic on obesity. Mostly I love love love fat activism that doesn't fit neatly into a box, activism that's embodied, imaginative, lawless and free, and mindful of wider liberation

struggles. For example, some of my friends are organising a queer and trans fat activist volunteer brothel over a weekend this summer, I'm volunteering as a sex worker, I'll be beating the shit out of willing punters as a community service, heehee. This is the stuff that moves and thrills me.

Who/ what continues to influence you today? What are your favourite projects, collectives etc Who are your favourite writers, artists, performers etc.

I'm really lucky to have many inspiring friends, and to be part of various communities where a lot of exciting and radical things are happening. I'll throw a few names out for folks to Google, with apologies to those I've overlooked.

Alison Henry, Allyson Mitchell, Amanda Piasecki, Amy Spencer, Ann Kaloski, Baron Schwarz, Bea Sweet, Bertha Pearl, Beth Ditto, Bevin Branlandingham, Bildwechsel, Bill Savage/Rachel White, Bird La Bird, BJ, Cathy Ward, Charley Stone, Cheryl B., Chris Vargas and Greg Youmans, Christa Holka, Coral Short, Corinna Tomrley, CREEP Club, David Hoyle, Deb Malkin, Debi Withers, Devra Polack, Elana Dykewomon, Elana Escalera, Em Ledger, Emli Bendixen, Emma Hedditch, Finn Lorne, Frances Gapper, Geleni Fontaine, Gesine Claus, Gina Birch and all of The Raincoats, Glenn Marla, Hannele Harjunen, Helen Reed, Helen Wickham, Ines Voigts, Iris Palmer, Jacqui Gingras, Jason Barker, Jessica Lauren, Julia Downes, Julian Eardley, Kaoru Sato, Katie LeBesco, Katy Hathaway, Kay Hyatt, Kelli Dunham, Kelli Jean Drinkwater, Kira Jolliffe, Kirsty Fife, Kori Klima, Larry Bob Roberts, Lea Andrews, Laura Agustín, Len Lukowska, Llewellyn Louderback, Louise Carolin, Lucy Aphramor, Lukas Blakk, Martin Walden, Max Airborne, Mel Pritchard, Michelle Tea, Mike Wyeld, Naima Lowe, Nazmia Jamal, Nine, Nomy Lamm, Rachel Berger, Red Chidgey, Ros Murray, Roz Kaveney, Ruth Russell, Sadie Lee, Sam Murray, Sarit Michaeli, Simon Murphy, Sondra Solovay, Stewart Irwin, Stewart Keith, SuMay Hwang, Susan Stinson, Tahani Nadim, Tamsin Bookey, Theodora Blessings Brown, Val Langmuir, Zoe Meleo Irwin, the Unskinny Bop crowd, the Fat Studies crowd, the Nolose crowd, my Charlotte Cooper name twin who does Subtext magazine and is a fierce feminist, various SM Dykes, the Toronto fatties, including Kaleb Robertson and the Fat Femme Mafia.

The people above are living, praise be! But there are some who are not who continue to inspire me very much, and who I miss. They are: Andy Roberts, ace DIY kingpin; Berta Freistadt, 21st century second wave lesbian; Brixton Brady, beauty personified; my badass brother Paul and my lovely mum Rosemary.

People I don't know so well, but who rock my motherfucking world, include: Agnès Varda, Ann Rower, Drag Racing Underground, Gelitin, Jungle Pam, Lydia Davis, Miranda July, Patrick Califia, and the entire population of Detroit.

Recommend a zine of yours to read and also another favourite zine.

I don't have much in print at the moment, though if people want to get in touch I can probably rustle up something to send them. It's probably best of people go and have

a look at my blogs: www.obesitytimebomb.blogspot.com is where I talk about fat and www.kinkzine.blogspot.com is my recently resurrected kinky queer grrl sex zine.

A zine I'd recommend is FaT GiRL, of course. It's old and so good. I think Max Airborne is still selling full sets of them from her Etsy shop, as well as copies of Size Queen, which is also excellent. Try www.etsy.com/shop/maxairborne

I love to hear from people! Don't be shy! I am a real person too!
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