

**Interview with *Motion Sickness* by Micheál O'Connell  
for the exhibition *Unrequited Like* at DODO  
September 2020**

Motion Sickness is an art collective based in Cambridge, UK, and Leipzig, Germany. Formed in 2018, the collective is made up of Denise Kehoe, Eleanor Breeze and Arabella Hilfiker. Their name is taken from motion sickness, a symptom of the brain receiving signals that differ from those which the eyes are seeing. This disparity of perception is a metaphor for the incongruity that millennials often experience when comparing where they believe they should be in their lives, with where they are in reality.

**Micheál:** What would you do if there was no such thing as art (which maybe there isn't)?

**Denise:** Hmm everything I am interested in extends to art! I thought about journalism for a while but that is a bit art too really?

**Ellie:** I feel a bit guilty about art sometimes and in my head I want to think I'd be doing something in medicine!! But I'm squeamish soo... Also think I'd have had therapy a lot sooner if there was no art!

**Denise:** Ya, it defo is indulgent. I like to think if I wasn't doing art I'd be doing something positive to help people but that's probably bullshit.

**Ary:** Recently I have been hating art SO MUCH because I think actually a lot of people's incentive behind making art is to help people, encourage an emotion or a different perspective or just an enjoyment through storytelling. Great, pure reasons for making art. But I feel like the way we are taught to critique art doesn't quite leave much space for good intention.

Rant. Over. I considered being a Charity worker too, or theatre. Which I guess is also art.

**Ellie:** I think that's so egotistical though, to assume that you can achieve something noble through your artwork!! I think that's why I'd rather just see someone making something authentic, whatever that is for them

**Ary:** I don't know though, there are some really great community art projects, for a really obvious example Assemble. I feel like assuming change can be made by hanging an artwork in a gallery, expecting the public to see it, and experience some kind of altering experience from that is naive but I think there is definitely a lot of positive dialogue and amazing things which can be made through community and workshop based projects.

**Micheál:** Okay, those answers, in different ways, all reflect a concern for the state of things. In my opinion a highly politicised generation has emerged in the past decade. Your work reflects that attitude but is simultaneously understated, not egotistical in the way that 'committed' art or art-activism can sometimes appear (imo). I think the attitude adds to the potency: it is satire of a sort. Before this question becomes too convoluted: on an imagined spectrum from Earnestness/Belief at one extreme and Cynicism/Nihilism at the other where do you stand?

**Denise:** It's so easy to be cynical these days! But I'm actively trying to be a bit more positive. Maybe cos things are so shit, artists should try to be a bit more optimistic, it is definitely more of a challenge to make work like this so, in answer to your question, I'm currently at Charlie Brooker levels of cynicism but aspiring to reach Bob Ross levels!

**Ellie:** Yes agreed! I'd say super cynical... I don't know if I'm speaking for everyone here but I think there's this understanding in the collective that we won't be able to change the status quo through the

work we make, so it becomes sort of jokey, throwaway comments about bits of life and society we might not like.

**Denise:** Ya, defo! Humour has that ability to undermine everything too, including art itself!

**Ary:** ahahhaaaaa fuuuuuuuck. What a great question. I will get to these questions tomorrow, I am off to work right now, in a Hummus bar. Dream job.

**Micheál:** I was just studying the conversation again, and your responses to the question. So I am retracting the question I had in mind, for a bit. Instead, would you say that there's something enchanting in the problems you often foreground, to do with human relationships with, and via, technology? You used the word authentic: is that something which is connected with everyday 'stupidity', common behaviour in relation to social media, the proliferation of devices, apps and platforms (and also other contemporary trends and habits)? Or is your exposing, or at least pointing at, the madness of it all, 'authentic'. Some of the work is very funny, but you're not presenting yourselves as a bunch of comedians. Nevertheless laughter, most would agree, is authentic and not possible to contrive.

**Denise:** I think that's really interesting about the tethered self and being constantly on/off.. there's a pressure to be always reachable and available but I also think devices catalyse that sort of existing in the middle of being on and off... a kind numb/coma state as our attention and data are becoming commodified. It sedates us like a thin blanket keeping us lukewarm! I think it is particularly potent for younger generations who don't know a world without the current internet. I used to think that the 2000s would be full of robots but actually, it feels we are robots being directed and fed by algorithms. I probably sound like a mad conspiracy theorist saying that but I think there's truth to it! I have been thinking of the internet as a kind of city recently! Full of billboards/ opportunities for capitalism and messages trying to grab our attention! Constant connection to everything is simultaneously amazing and horrible... So, there is an enchantment to some degree! As data learns who we are and sells it back to us, it's a false promise that we seem to keep believing in!

Authenticity is definitely challenged now. In obvious ways with fake news but also in more personal ways. When we take photos of experiences, we are not really living in the experience, you are just posing for it and thinking of how it will look on social media, it is a constant hyperreal construction to appease the fucking phone. Social media is designed to be used as a tool of filtering and editing of the self. But then again art adopts the same process through curation...Even with this interview, I'm currently re-editing my answer in Google docs so, maybe we are all frauds!

There is always an element of truth in humour and joking I think too! For me, message dictates the medium and what's relevant. Nothing should be ruled out I think. But the other sickos might have more to say on that as they work more in printing/painting!

**Ary:** I think there are a lot of questions about the 'appropriate' material to use which are really interesting. In a way I still feel like it is authentic to use drawing, painting and text because those are the mediums with which we were taught to communicate through. I agree with Denise that it is message which drives the choice of material, but we all have our materials with which we are comfortable or enjoy using. There can also be the argument, if a piece of art is about a clear message, should it be an essay...

Medium has its own 'voice' too, and therefore can be played with, so again going back to the discussion about using painting or printmaking or bronze sculpture (for example) aka very traditional, time consuming mediums, to talk about contemporary urban lifestyle is bridging a gap between what is taught as art (in schools) and our current social system. I also enjoy the humour and irony of using handmade, very rudimentary materials to discuss social media anxieties

'The Tethered Self' is kind of an option. Our obsession and addiction to social media is an option, perhaps easier for us to say not having completely grown up the social media age. I feel so incredibly lucky that Instagram didn't exist when I was 6, I don't think social media is healthy. Interestingly in Germany, people my age tend to spend a lot less time on their phones than in England, there is also quite a movement against smart phones happening AND funnily enough most people who do use their phones a lot and actually care about their followers, likes, stories are all fucking artists

**Micheál:** I think I deleted the question which mentioned Sherry Turkle's 'Tethered Self' because part of me was interested in not throwing thinkers, references to artists, practitioners and theorists into the discussion but maybe some of that is okay. Perhaps Turkle often states the obvious but people like Caroline Bassett (now at Cambridge by the way) discusses new media and the digital landscape in other ways: she talks about the 'tendency of utopia to disappoint'.

**Ellie:** Just to speak on authenticity - I think this is becoming really challenging when it comes to sharing artworks online. I'm finding myself questioning the works that end up on social media, on my own profiles and on other people's. Sometimes it can feel that people develop a certain language because it translates well on Instagram and to me, that doesn't feel like a genuine reason to make something. I think the same filtering thing that we're doing to our lives, artists are also starting to do to their work

**Micheál:** 'Authenticity' is usually lauded but, I suspect, can be a dangerous ambition too: I can see other reasons for the concern about throwing material online though. The fact is that you have less influence, less control of how the work is experienced, and that may seem democratic in some way but, on the other hand, isn't there an imperative for people who want to communicate something (artists, let's call them: yourselves) to take responsibility and assert control, or at least have a more comprehensive sense for the variety of ways your work might be received? Long sentence. What I mean is this possibly not also an instinctive reason for you wanting to do work with tangible materials, in physical spaces, which can be experienced in close proximity?

**Denise:** Ya, I think art means something different online. It becomes just another thing fighting for people's attention! Its context is flipped and art is positioned alongside selfies/ ads/ pictures of holidays and other artworks. In a sense, you do still have control. You are selecting what is shown but you can't control how people will react to it or even see it. On Instagram, art is rated in a 'likes' economy and is rewarded with instant reactions from people guided by the algorithm, which is the ultimate art curator really. I guess one positive is there is potential to engage people who wouldn't ordinarily be heading to the galleries. Online, the image of the work is more important than the work itself. But when physical works are in a gallery context, most of the time, you can't touch them anyway: galleries have been training us for social distancing! But at least in real life, you do get that sense of space to experience an artwork's physicality. I think talking about the internet in a physical space allows some critical distance from Pret A Manger ads. That's kind of why online viewing rooms aren't very appealing.

**Ellie:** Yes Denise!!! All of this!

**Micheál:** Given that Cambridge has been mentioned, and your activities have been associated with the place: is focusing on a particular area important to you? I know that you are not all living in Cambridge now but does locality matter, and what does that mean given the acceleration in remote working and communication currently taking place due to Covid, but with that having been part of the promise of the digital network, the internet, the web and then social media as it emerged, decades ago?

**Denise:** I guess we all met in Cambridge and we definitely all felt very frustrated by the stiff academia! Also, there were no real opportunities for emerging artists in the city so we just had a collective pent

up energy! Maybe we started in a way where place was important but now it seems remoteness is part of the work. Like location isn't so relevant. So, maybe ya, we are reaping the rewards of Mark Zuck's labour.

I think working remotely makes you rethink human contact and connection a lil? And I think that comes into the work! But there are ironies in making work remotely through online networks to critique those exact systems!

**Micheál:** I just wanted to put this in but not necessarily for a response now: don't both mainstream and social media seem to almost determine which subjects or issues can be discussed? It is as if only one thing can be important at a time, and that to mention the complexity of the situation or other concerns is an outrage. In recent years say, the following headings, not necessarily in order: Brexit, Extinction Rebellion, Greta Thunberg, antisemitism, #MeToo, The Backstop, Covid, BLM, statues.

**Denise:** Hmm.. I think that's true to some extent but that can exist in online communication too, like tone is lost? Sometimes things can seem hurtful when they weren't intended that way. I think social media chat will reflect the issues of the time. Social media tends to warp, disfigure and amplify what's goin' on! Obvs evident in fake news/ echo chambers and stuff

**Ary:** OR a lot funnier than they are in person. GIF's are socially irresponsible; some people are just really savvy at using the right gif at the right time.

I think location depends on your own area of interest, for us we do make work which responds to our social climate, the online and real life are intertwined, perhaps more so if there is more time put into an online presence within your immediate peer group and or job.

**Denise:** Ya true! Can I be meta in the interview and also ask a question to Ary. Do you think Leipzig has changed your work?

**Ary:** So much. To begin with it was mainly to do with size, coming from Cambridge where you are lucky to get 7 meters of studio space for £120 you really have to think about what to make and there isn't the luxury of collecting materials and making large sculptures just for experiments. There is also a huge culture of 'zu verschenken' boxes, instead of taking things to second-hand shops, people just leave their old furniture, pots, clothes on the streets. I think this encourages a lot of people to make work with found objects. However, in terms of content the transition was quite hard, there is a lot of political/social commentary in most art in Germany, but I feel like there is a lot of scepticism when irony and humour are used as a 'medium'.

**Micheál:** An obscure question. There are three of you: is that a good number? (I associate the number 3 with female collective work, and maybe 1 or 2 with patriarchy or whatever.)

**Denise:** Haha! 2 is patriarchal? I think with three, there is a good bounce!

**Ellie:** Interesting!! I think it's good because it allows one of you to have an energy crash every now and then, and the other two can keep trucking regardless.

**Ary:** When working all together is intense but wonderful.

**Micheál:** I feel like we should talk about the work a bit. You do produce actual artefacts, with names and boundaries. This is not a vague and open ended approach. Is that something you have thought about?

**Denise:** I think text is a really important element to all of our works. It can really help us to anchor meaning for the viewer. Even our name Motion Sickness took agggggesss to think of. But ya, titles

can help stop works from becoming vague and solidify meaning a lil to give the viewer suggestion! We'll often have lil jokey titles / puns whatever! I think it can help the work to be accessible! If people can get the joke, they can get the artwork! Materiality can speak to that as well! Having works you can interact with or you can understand how they are made, can help them become less ambiguous!

**Ary:** I agree, I think also sometimes, even though one thinks an artwork is quite obvious in its message, it probably isn't. Therefore titles really help. I feel like in Motion Sickness our work kind of goes in a circle, the motive, or 'issue' being discussed is quite simple, through using very playful, rudimentary mediums I think the simplicity is challenged because the viewer is being asked to find the middle point between play and intention. As Denise said that's often deliberately using the tone of a medium.

**Micheál:** Oh yea, either Marcel Duchamp or Baroness Elsa von Freytag Loringhoven once said the title is like having another colour on the pallet.

**Ellie:** Yeah I think for me producing objects and then giving them a clear context takes the work away from being something conceptual to the point of being pretentious. None of us are interested in confusing people for the sake of it, I think we'd rather that people got where we are coming from and have the space to think about the work.

That sense of DIY was really important early on too; there were lots of scrappy sculptures, for instance using papier-mâché and old cardboard boxes. We're making less objects now, but I think that visual language is still recognisable in the performances, for example the phone costumes that me and Ary wear. The mobile is barely recognisable but i like the fact that they always come out looking a bit crap. The point is never to be slick

**Ary:** I think the way in which the Phone performances are developing is to see play, and playfulness as a medium. Using what we have around us, in a way mimicking how children play make-believe games and build dens. Perhaps these performances are the compromise between 'fuck this bleak bullshit' and giving time and thought to the place of the digital within our lives.....

**Micheál:** I really like that clarity, and the desire to avoid being deliberately obscure, as if complexity makes a thing more sophisticated really. Sometimes there's a rationale to deliberate ambiguity though no? To the untrained eye or ear, apparent vagueness can seem pretentious but is not always. It can be a way of avoiding didacticism and opening things up consciously, whilst remaining interested in producing something resolved. And, not that didacticism is always a problem either. 'Pretentiousness' like 'authenticity' is a reasonable term to use, but maybe too easy to go along with, and risky for those reasons. There are inverse kinds of pretentiousness too, are there not? Your activities walk these tightropes skilfully I think. You are not 'dumbing down' nor are you frightened of being entertaining, clear and witty.

The scrappiness is a great draw for me. In a way it fits with certain principles of expediency, of doing enough, but not more than necessary, to make the point. I guess historically this would have been what separated certain notions of 'art' with 'craft'. Apologies for using the overused word 'notion' there. Also though - and referring to the last point of mine above - the imperfection, does create a degree of ambiguity, and therefore a challenge is presented to the spectator/audience, and I would say the effect is quite poetic. On the other hand, it would be easy to get this wrong, and for the thing to fall flat. The lack of polished-ness also distinguishes from the corporate, and corporate-art.

**Ary:** This comment touches on something I think about a lot, that of the spectator/audience get it wrong, think its shit, miss the intention etc. especially to people who aren't artists, aren't interested in the arts or worse, don't feel like they can be because they didn't grow up in a gallery/museum visiting family. For me, working with scrappy materials, allowing unfinished work to be finished etc. feels like a

personal rejection of the 'standards' and elitism of the art gallery world, but I often think that, if the intention is rrrreeeeaaally and honestly to make accessible, entertaining, relatable and enjoyable work surely sticking to mediums which already have a strong solid place and way of being interpreted, is more socially conscious?

**Micheál:** Thinking about established artists, ones embraced by 'the system' in the past and now, would you say that, off the top of my head, Samuel Beckett, or Sophie Calle or Glenn Ligon or Martha Rosler or Martin Creed or Elisabeth Price were examples of elitist art?

**Denise:** This is a funny one! To the art outsider, they are super elitist (so maybe that itself answers the question!) but I think to an insider, their work is comparatively easy enough to grasp and get the tongue and cheek of...

Martin Creed is a walking argument for the everyday taxpayer on why art funding is nonsense.

**Ary:** I did see a talk by Martin Creed when I was seven doing my GCSE's. I remember being furious because he kept saying he didn't see himself as an artist or his work as art. Like he wasn't taking any ownership of it or being answerable for it. I think I was so angry because I couldn't understand what he meant. Now I kind of like his work but I have a masters in art. Yes it is elitist.

**Micheál:** A basic question: what are the three works, activities or projects you have done together, which you are most satisfied with?

**Ellie:** I think my favourite works that I've been involved in making have been the video/performance pieces, mainly the swan lake/mobile phone video. I think it's because it's so different to the work I make on my own, which as paintings are super static in comparison! It's a way of creating a narrative that was really different for me. Also, it's so silly and it still makes me laugh to watch it back.

**Denise:** I'm actually pretty happy with our name and logo!! I think our logo is a bit of an artwork and a good intro to what we stand for!

**Micheál:** The logo is super in my opinion, and the name, and generally your titles. As already mentioned, you take that seriously. You said it took time and effort to invent that name and design the logo?

**Ary:** Ellie and Denise are super-humans and they are works of art in themselves. But aside from that, I would say I also really enjoy making the videos with Ellie.

**Denise:** U too ary!!

**Micheál:** How do you manage the difference between your individual practices, which are separate from Motion Sickness?

**Ellie:** I've really struggled with this!! My individual practice is probably the furthest from the work we do as motion sickness and I've felt quite fraudulent about it.

**Micheál:** Fraudulent about your work or your input into Motion Sickness work?

**Ellie:** Fraudulent about my input... I think Denise and Ary have had a huge impact on me and so the work I make within the collective is very different and just wouldn't have happened without them. But I suppose that's the point of being in a collective together, in that you have an effect on each other. I'm still figuring out how my two practices fit together!



**Micheál:** Surely it is important to have variety? A lot of people have been painting and turning to painting again in recent years.

**Ary:** I feel though that with Motion Sickness Projects space your [Ellie's] taste and choices have been massively influential and brought in diversity and a really good high standard of artists.

**Denise:** Ary and Ellie have made works together but I work alongside! Mine is pretty similar! But it was good to be offered this show because the sound piece I've got for this was kind of made in a vacuum that didn't really fit in with what I'm currently looking at (climate change stuff)...but fit it for this! So it is really good to have a place to develop it a little bit more!

**Ary:** When we first started making work together my work was a lot more 2D, in general my practice has changed a lot through working as a collective. Now I would say my work is following the same route but I think I tend to be a bit more controlling and insecure about my personal practice.

**Ellie:** Why do you think you're more controlling and insecure about it?

**Ary:** I think because all the decisions and fun are in my own head. When we're preparing for a show and discussing ideas the decision making process is lighter and more fun.

**Ellie:** Ahh true!! Yeah it's less pressure when you're bouncing ideas off your mates. And more fun!!

**Ary:** ...and we get where we are coming from.

**Micheál:** How will you prepare for the show at Dodo? Is the work already made or envisaged?

**Denise:** Mine's in the works! Preparing the usual way, hoping for the best and that everything doesn't fall apart.

**Ellie:** Me and Ary are finishing a piece that's been in the pipeline for a while. A job for tonight hopefully! Over the magic of Zoom.

**Micheál:** Where do you see yourselves going with this (Motion Sickness) in the future or is that impossible to answer: is too much planning and scheming a bad idea? Not a loaded question. Promise.

**Denise:** Covid creeping up again makes it tricky to think too far ahead I think! I mean in terms of the space, we are hoping to get positive news this week with reopening but it's hard to plan too much!

**Ellie:** Agreed. And in terms of us as a collective outside of the project space, I think things ebb and flow as to how productive we're feeling. We've not made work together for a while so this exhibition has been a good prompt to get going again, but it's nice to go easy on ourselves and know that we'll pick things up when we're ready rather than burning out!