

Info for paper:

Bishi's full name:

Bishi Bhattacharya

The name of the person she originally co-founded WITCiH with (and did her SLEEP and Whitechapel Gallery collaborations with):

Matt Hardern AKA Glammorre

WITCiH:

Women In Technology Creative industries Hub

Past WITCiH event locations:

Bargehouse, London UK

Tate Modern, Uniqulo Tate Lates, London UK

Past WITCiH event guests (performers/speakers:

Bishi Bhattacharya

Imogen Heap (performer, developer of Mi.Mu gloves)

Natalie Sharp AKA Lone Taxidermist (performer, composer)

Miri Kat (live coder)

Jenn Kirby (sound artist, performer)

Lia Mice (producer, instrument designer)

Terry Tyldesley AKA Kat Feral Five (performer, blogger)

Vicky O'Neon (performer, composer)

The OMNII Collective (Network of women and non-binary studio engineers and producers)

Rebekah Ubuntu (interdisciplinary artist, composer)

Rachel Wingfield (architect)

Events we filmed for making the documentary:

- o 14/02/2018 Inferno Summit Panel Discussion, The Moth Club, Hackney
- o 19/02/2018 Bishi live performance, The Lexington, Islington
- o 23/02/2018 WITCiH Salon, The Tate Modern, Bankside
- o 25/02/2018 Bishi webcast performance and interview, Performance Lab, Queen Mary University, Mile

End

WITCiH Tumblr Account:

<http://witcih.tumblr.com/>

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION

C0013 - Sony A7ii

1:28 - clap

Lia: So tell me as a creative artist why is it music that you've chosen to express yourself with?

Bishi: Well this is going to sound very cheesy, but I think that music has chosen me. Which lots of people say, but, my mum is a very respected Indian classical singer so I was lucky that I had a lot of music growing up. It always felt like the most

natural thing. And it felt like a vocation. And I think it was also introduced to me in a way that was really fun. My mum worked for the BBC World Service so we would do pretend radio shows at home. And she would teach me things. And it was nice. It never felt forced. So it's always been a very present medium in my life.

02:38

Lia: So she has a classical background. What's her take on the tech?

Bishi: I don't really know. Actually I do because she's really opinionated. My mum's really supportive of what I do and she sees the value of everything. I think it's a lot for her to take in. She doesn't necessarily get everything, and when people don't get things they can be a bit hostile. So I think it can make her a bit confused sometimes. But then I explain to her that she doesn't have to like something for there to be a value in it. And I think that that's quite important. But overall she's really positive about everything.

Lia: Do you think overall this attitude that 'it's not for everyone' is a powerful thing for artists to remember?

03:44

Bishi: I've been I guess a professional musician for 15 years. I was first in a recording studio 20 years ago, and I very much just made my own way and made my own career path. And it's really humbling and important to learn that whatever you do, some people are going to like it, some people won't and it's really fine either way. It's very empowering, yeah.

Lia: So your trajectory was...?

Bishi: I started learning the piano when I was 5. I also started I guess studying classical voice around 8 or 9. I started doing classical Indian voice when I was 5 as well. Playing the harmonium. Then I took up the sitar when I was 15. I taught myself the bass when I was 14. And then I got into analog synthesizers through my boyfriend at the time. So yeah I just have always found it really fascinating. And then I met my old creative partner Matthew Glymour. Who was a founding member of the performance art band called Minty, which was founded by the late performance artist Lee Bowery. And that's how I got into DJing and clubs and performance and all of that.

05:15

Lia: So how did the whole WITCiH Network begin.

Bishi: The way the WITCiH network began was I was a guest on my old creative partner Matthew Glamorre, AKA Hardern AKA Glamorre. He had started an audio-visual collective called CRUX and he hosted these happenings in a tv studio in SOHO. And they went really well. There was improvised visuals and improvised musicians and then there would be different artists come on and perform. So we had completed a series of 6 to 8 of those. And I remember thinking there's something going on here. There's definitely an audio-visual community but there's no real base for us. And we also need to meet more people who are within our world. And I remember saying to him there's something about women in technology. And we had a bit of a conversation about it. And I said it would be really nice for me to host an event for women in technology. And he said "You should call it WITCH" so to which I said "So the Women In Technology, C for Creative, and then I just thought Industries Hub." and then we sort of came up with the idea to put the 'i' in the middle of the C and H. And I remember telling him that the 'I' was for information and intelligence, and I had all these other adjectives that went with 'I'. But because we were really busy touring our last production, that was an audio-visual presentation of my last album Albion Voice - we were busy taking it around the world. And so it took me a little bit of time to get WITCiH off the ground. It started as a tumblr account. It was just as I was starting to re-change my relationship to social media. And so it really started as a social media project. And then the first ever WITCiH that we did which was near Tower Hill, that was a bit of a disaster. Because I didn't really know what I wanted it to be. And then I got introduced to Debbie Halin at the Bargehouse. And that's where I really honed in what the format would be.

I think when you start any project you just don't really know what it's going to be or how it's going to go. But it just instantly worked in that format and there was a really good feeling around it. So for the past year, maybe year and a half, I have been curating monthly salons. And I recently curated an entire floor at the Tate Modern for the Uniqlo Tate Lates. And it really feels like I have started to amass a scene of women. I am now raising funds to establish WITCiH as an incubator space and a platform that funds technology projects. So that's the next step. And I'm in talks with a production company to turn WITCiH into a podcast. And it's really exciting to have an idea or have a feeling about where there's something amiss in the cultural landscape. And to have a really clear vision about what that could be. And then to watch something grown. It's been a really amazing experience.

Lia: It's amazing that it's grown from the Bargehouse to the Tate. Can you describe what a typical WITCiH Salon is like?

09:02

Bishi: Yeah, well a typical WITCiH Salon usually starts at around 7:00/7:30. There are usually 3 to 4 guests. One of them will be a speaker and the other 2 or 3 will be performances of some kind or another. And I introduce each woman, and then I'll usually do a set of my own music as well. It's been wonderful to have the space to be able to experiment with what I'm doing as an artist as well. But we've had really formidable guests, so everybody from Mira Calix to Imogen Heap to Ana Metronic. And as I'm raising money to put towards WITCiH festivals, there's a whole line up of other really fascinating Women and non-binary in tech.

10:16

Lia: Like you said, it's filling a void. It's giving a space to people who have been not recognized.

Bishi: I definitely think that in our cultural landscape, in theory people are very accepting, and they very much want to see change. But the gatekeepers keep making very specific decisions. And there's no real answer as to why that keeps happening. I mean there are definitely giant boys clubs, and unless you keep prodding them and keep reminding people that there are others that there are other people with different kinds of ideas and they're just as valid then y'know it's not going to change. I mean, we are starting to see the seeds of change, but starting. I get asked to go on to lots of panels and talk about diversity in the arts. And it's really simple to me - you have to invest. Otherwise you're not going to see that change. And y'know if men invest - if they invest in something different - then they can pat themselves on the back. Because it will work.

Lia: People are saying things but it's the actions that make change.

Bishi: You take that president of the Grammys. Maybe it was a slip-up when he was talking about Women stepping up but I think it was his subconscious bias showing and I just think what a shame. He's just shown himself to be completely out of touch. And a man of his position who could use his position to really say something. He really showed his true colours. And I know they say that they're setting up a fund to encourage more women, but we'll see.

12:50

Lia: Do you feel that as a woman who makes music and is always pushing forwards. Do you feel that technology has given you more agency over your artwork than if you were not using technology?

Bishi: The ideal situation would be for me to have an entire live band with me being able to operate different kinds of gestural technology, and the Ableton Push, and to play my sitar. But for the time being there is something about the Ableton Push, the looping and the sitar, and being able to perform and move. It's really come together beautifully. You very often have ideas and you have no idea how they are going to play out in reality, So it feels really good and it feels less like I'm doing karaoke. I mean, even the other night at the Tate, there are certain songs which are synced to visuals, and I know that it looks impressive and whatever. But there's something about functioning, kind of, y'know it's almost like choreography. It's not even about the button-pressing during the songs, it's about all of the different settings between songs, how I'm tuning things up, how I'm talking to the audience. There's quite a lot to remember. But once I'm able to really get into it then I really feel like I can let go onstage.

Lia: And you can't let go as much without that much control.

14:41

Lia: Can you describe your signal path onstage?

Bishi: So I'm operating, everything is coming off my Ableton set-up through my Push and to my focusrite card, and that's attached by a midi cable into my RC-505 so that everything is synced in time. And then my sitar just goes through another DI box. But yeah. I mean in the future I'd like to get some more synths in there. I'd like to do it with a live drummer. It's really interesting to see what bands are doing with the Ableton set-up. So that's definitely the next step. And then I know from my AV friends in New York, I know that you can operate visuals with the Push set up as well. So I think that's going to be the next steps. I was actually talking to another musician the other day he was telling me on his recent album. He actually constructed a lot of songs with the Ableton Push using it as a keyboard and then he'd transcribe them on his guitar or onto the piano and then getting his band to play around that. So it's really extraordinary what's going on. But I definitely don't

want to be one of those people who just looks into their machines and just looks into their laptop. I think having the contact with the audience is really important.

16:25

Lia: Back to WITCiH. What is a Witch?

Bishi: So the WITCiH that I've set up is the Women in Technology Creative Industries Hub. But traditionally the witch has been a figure that has been shrouded with a lot of negative connotations - mostly through societal and legal and for religious reasons. But for me a WITCiH is a woman who has a lot of knowledge. And knowledge makes women powerful. And I still believe that powerful women are secretly really taboo. In the same way that society doesn't like sissy-boys. We don't really trust powerful women. I was listening to a really great Mary Beard lecture about women in power and how she believes it comes from greek tragedy and greek mythology where a majority of women have not been seen to have earned their power through their own merits. They're always seen as sorceresses or demons of some kind that have falsely snatched power, or just have power that they use for bad. And you can see it in our modern day anthology of women. Personally, I love Disney witches as well because I think they are sexier and smarter and more fun than the boring-ass princesses. But that's just me. But yes I think a witch is a woman who has power, and a lot of knowledge and isn't afraid to use that knowledge.

Lia: That talk sounds amazing I want to see it. But yeah it's like there's a preconception of some people that a high profile powerful woman is lucky or hasn't worked for it.

Bishi: There's a lot of mistrust around women who are powerful and talented. And we are in this moment of feminism where I think lots of people fancy themselves as being really fierce and really sticking their heads above the parapet. But when you do, if you do, you're prone to getting a lot of crap thrown your way. But it's tough, no not tough, it's complex being a powerful woman and a woman who has knowledge, because people don't want to really believe it. But my attitude to things is sod that, just do your own thing.

Lia: What kind of crap has been thrown your way?

Bishi: What kind of crap has been thrown my way? I think I always get "oh you're always busy aren't you?", it's so random. I mean, I think it's one of those things, I've had so much crap thrown at me for such a long time that I block it all out. And they're right I am too busy to really engage with a lot of it. "Oh you're always doing things!" It's very strange. I think I just disengage from it, because precisely I don't have time to engage. Which doesn't mean to say it doesn't affect me. And it doesn't mean to say that. But I definitely think there's an air of women who don't deserve what they have. And it's really prevalent online you just need to look at any comments board to look at the difference between how men are critiqued and how women are critiqued. Both of them are just called assholes, but I think it's the nature of what's thrown at a woman is a lot more controversial.

21:05

Lia: Something that speaks to me about WITCiH is that I see these role-models. Do you think we need to be able to see our role-models to move forward? And who are your role-models?

Bishi: Yeah I definitely think we need role-models in order for people to feel confident about stepping forward. I was listening to a technology podcast on the Guardian and they were talking about black innovators in tech history - it was really interesting. But they spoke to a young coder of black origin and she said that what was holding her back was not seeing enough role models. So we know as a culture that role-models are really important. I mean the women who inspire me - the witches of the past it's definitely Hedy Lamar, Wendy Carlos, and that's much more on the tech side. Who else? God so many of them. I really admire Holly Herndon. I really admire God there are so many of them. Daphne Oram, Delia Derbyshire. Those are WITCiHes of the past. One of the great things about doing this project is I keep meeting really interesting women and non-binary folk who are doing really extraordinary things with tech. And it feels like there is a really growth and a real momentum happening around it.

23:15

Lia: Who are some more tech idols?

Bishi: I would say that the one tech idol that I've had throughout my life is Laurie Anderson because she was really able to combine technology and performance and music and improvisation in a way that is truly extraordinary. And untouchable. No-one has done it better than her, in my opinion.

Bishi: Yeah. She was the mother of all that interdisciplinary female tech stuff. And also her work covers such an extraordinary expanse of different subjects, different issues. I've seen her quote everything from buddhist philosophy, to Herman Melville's Moby Dick, to her last Heart Of A Dog film which was really a love poem to her late husband Lou Reed. So she really deals with live and death and living in such an extraordinary way.

Lia: And has an amazing voice.

Bishi: Oh she has a completely amazing voice. Yeah.

Lia: So speaking of being interdisciplinary, i'm fascinated by your collaborations with tech. So I want to see what that brings out as an artist to collaborate.

25:07

Bishi: One of the reasons that I collaborate with people is that I feel that your collaborators bring things out of you, and they bring out dimensions of you that you wouldn't have seen before. And they're able to reflect parts of you that were unseen. So that's one of the main reasons that I collaborate. Another reason is because I'll very often have an idea or there'll be a project and there will be skills that I lack in that I want to learn about. Or there'll be some other thing. I mean collaboration comes from a place of wanting to really learn. And I really, really enjoy it. I believe that actually most work is collaborative. Unless it's just one person and a camera. Or one person and a guitar. Everything is some form of collaboration and I think that's a really great thing. So one of the collaborations that I worked on was a project for the Science Gallery called In Sleep where I went to the Evelina Sleep Clinic in Guy's Hospital. And I had my sleep waves monitored. And this was a piece I collaborated on with the composer Neil Caser. And I had set a Shakespeare sonnet for 14 voices. Sonet #43 which is all about sleeping. And Neil then combined the sound of my sleep waves to sort of filter in and out of this sonnet. And that was the perfect combination of a time-based performance. Even me being in that sleep clinic felt like a time-based performance. So it was technology, it was science, it was a time-based performance and it was music, all together. So that's the kind of thing that I'm really interested in.

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Lia: Can you speak a bit about tech collaborations?

Bishi: Another collaboration that I worked on was with an organisation called Gorilla Science, who are based in the US and UK, and they asked me to compose a soundtrack for a Virtual Reality app where you are flying around in space - it was a space vacation app. So in a sense that was a lot more straightforward as it was writing incidental music for a film, but there was something about the nature of the VR and where we are going entertainmentwise. It was new territory for me and I very much wrote the music as I was flying around with this VR headset on me.

I am very fascinated by the developments around VR and entertainment and technology. I think that's where the entertainment value of things is coming together so I'd definitely be interested in doing more VR activity.

And one of the first ever AV tech collaborations that I did - again it was with my old creative partner Matthew Harden, the composer Neil Caser and the interactive artist Oscar Soul.

We made a piece of interactive music performance art for the opening of the Whitechapel Gallery's fundraiser that year, and I had a sensor suit on where I was controlling the sound and visuals. And the whole thing was dedicated to the hindu goddess Kali. So that was the first time that I really got into that kind of tech performance, and what it meant, and it was much older technology so I was definitely on a knife edge in terms of things working and not working. And that's one of the things about technology collaborations is y'know it could always go all wrong, but when it goes right you just feel like you're floating on air.

Lia: So what was Oscar Soul's role?

Bishi: Oscar Soul was the interactive artist so it was all of his visual design and his interactive technology. He designed all of the sensors and how that was interfacing with the sound and the visuals. We came on and sort of fleshed out this piece if you like. Or his technology was the basis for the piece that we then all collaborated on together.

Lia: AND... your latest AV album - is it an album?

Bishi: it's 3 EPs and one new album, it's just worked out that way.

Lia: can you introduce that?

Bishi: Well the first EP that I'm putting out in this trilogy is called the Winds Of Fate EP and it was made in response to a performance where I collaborated with an interactive wind harp which was based in a church in Stoke Newington that Elizabeth the 1st used to pray in. And I set a number of wind poems - that's when I first started working with my looper - and it's the first time I put myself forward as a producer - I've co-produced the entire EP. And it was all in response to this performance with an interactive wind harp. So that's the Winds of Fate EP.

And then I've just completed a residency in New York for an art space called National Sawdust. And it's called Bishi: The Good Immigrant, and it was inspired by The Good Immigrant, which is a collection of essays edited by Nikesh Shukla, where 21 black, asian and minority ethnic writers ruminate on race and and I was inspired by that to write and co-produce a song cycle inspired by the essays and I went and interviewed many of the writers of The Good Immigrant and I sampled in these quotes into the fabric of the music. And that's the first time that I started using the Ableton Push and the looper and the sitar together. So again it's been another development in terms of my understanding of tech and performance.

Lia: Could you do a small snappy sentence that says that my next thing is this album?

Bishi: So my next album is called Bishi the Good Immigrant, and it's inspired by the Good Immigrant collection of essays edited by Nikesh Shukla and it's been written for voice looper, electronics as operated by the Ableton Push and Sitar.

Lia: So you have now put on the producer hat?

Bishi: I think I was always a producer and then I did some session work for Toni Visconti on Daphne Guinness' album and it was really magic, we've become friends, and and he was the one to encourage me to step forward as a producer and to call myself one.

I definitely think that my relationship with tech has definitely been dominated by confidence issues. And when I've been going to lots of Women in Tech groups, and going to different conferences and different meet-ups there's definitely an issue around women and technology and confidence. A lot of the women have told me that the men that they work with are trying to be encouraging and trying to help them to step forward. So that's been an interesting discovery around WITCiH. Which is why I don't make a lot of my stance around WITCiH 'anti-man' because I don't think it's going to help anything. And I think in terms of equality and in terms of gender and representation we need to have mens' input to make things fairer. And we need to listen to each other. If we're shutting each other down it's just going to repeat. The problem is just not going to go away. So yeah it's been quite fascinating that it's been a rather legendary man who encouraged me to call myself a producer.

08:40

Louise: Did we ask anything about London?

Bishi: Well I was born and brought up in London, so it's always been a very important part of my work. And also London is a place which is very multi-cultural. There's a lot of information, a lot of culture, a lot of technology, a lot of things that go in and out of London. I mean, I've actually been doing my best to try and get away from London in the past few years because I just think that the city has changed so much. It has become so insufferable and so expensive for a lot of the creative people inside. I try not to be too much of a Debbie Downer because I believe that there's still a lot this city has to offer but I really think that there needs to be more of a fostering of community and of creative community.

Lia: So WITCiH having a place in London is like bringing forward a future you want London to become?

Bishi: One of the many reasons that I'm grateful to The Bargehouse for effectively giving me their space is they've given me a space for a movement to grow. And that's something that is very rare. I mean certainly in my early 20's there was a whole slew of dive bars, and spaces, and gig venues and clubs where people were just able to come. They were able to network and meet each other and find each other. Whereas with the advent of all London becoming a millionaire's playground. All of the rents shooting through the roof. All of the venues being shut down by the new rich people who move in. Everybody moving to Margate or Ramsgate or to Hastings, that's become impossible. So finding space in London for things to happen is something that I'm incredibly grateful for, and I know that as long as there's boredom, as long as there's frustration there's going to be fantastic creative work. So I haven't lost my faith yet.

11:20

Lia: Can you just say I'm Bishi as an introduction?

Bishi: Hello my name is Bishi - I'm a vocalist, musician, performance artist, producer, curator, co-founder and creative director of WITCiH which is the Women in Technology Creative Industries Hub.

IT'S A WRAP.

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Proposed order:

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So I'm operating, everything is coming off my Ableton set-up through my Push and to my focusrite card, and that's attached by a midi cable into my RC-505 so that everything is synced in time. And then my sitar just goes through another DI box.

Hello my name is Bishi - I'm a vocalist, musician, performance artist, producer, curator, co-founder and creative director of WITCiH which is the Women in Technology Creative Industries Hub.

So the WITCiH that I've set up is the Women in Technology Creative Industries Hub. But traditionally the witch has been a figure that has been shrouded with a lot of negative connotations - mostly through societal and legal and for religious reasons. But for me a WITCiH is a woman who has a lot of knowledge. And knowledge makes women powerful. And I still believe that powerful women are secretly really taboo. In the same way that society doesn't like sissy-boys. We don't really trust powerful women. I was listening to a really great Mary Beard lecture about women in power and how she believes it comes from greek tragedy and greek mythology where a majority of women have not been seen to have earned their power through their own merits. They're always seen as sorceresses or demons of some kind that have falsely snatched power, or just have power that they use for bad. And you can see it in our modern day anthology of women. Personally, I love Disney witches as well because I think they are sexier and smarter and more fun than the boring-ass princesses. But that's just me. But yes I think a witch is a woman who has power, and a lot of knowledge and isn't afraid to use that knowledge.

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-- footage of tate --

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-- footage of panel --

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