

HPS_NT_Gibside_Interview_17_Oct_2019

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KEY:

Cannot decipher = (unclear + time code)

Sounds like = [s.l + time code]

I1: = Interviewer

I2: = Interviewer

R: = Respondent.

NTO = Other person connected to the National Trust

R: Looking forward to seeing something more academic, something more, something based on some real data to support some of the assumptions that we make, some of the feelings that we have. For me personally, I think this goes back to the original hypothesis really but it's how I'm really, really keen to know how people feel about seeing contemporary art and experiencing contemporary art particularly at my place, at Gibside, but I am also interested in the other venues, the comparisons.

I1: How did you feel about the art based in Gibside?

R: It's so long ago now. I mean, you probably have my answers from previous interviews so it changed over the time.

I1: Of a selection.

R: Specific pieces, I really liked. I really liked Fiona's piece, I really liked where it was and what it said and how, watching people engage with it, I really enjoyed it. Andrew's piece as well, more complex to get in but I think I enjoyed having it at Gibside, it was a great part of the offer and I watch people engage with it. So, personally, yeah, I liked both pieces.

I2: Because you kept Andrew's, didn't you, for longer?

R: We did, yes, as long as we could, yes. Not just because they were hard to move but yes, they stayed, I think, for a full year before, they've been rehomed now.

I1: Why did you want to keep them?

- R: They added something to the locations they were in. People enjoyed engaging with them and I think, it was the practicality, and I think they didn't have a desperate, there wasn't someone desperate to take them away. So, they added something to the garden so I think we were keen to keep them there for a bit longer just as an extra engagement for our businesses and everything, the response during the original period was very positive so there's no reason for us not to really. We even tried to keep hold of a couple but Andrew wanted them all back. Apparently it's still open to negotiation though. Because they are based on Gibside, they're made for Gibside.
- I2: **That's interesting, because thinking about legacy, it came up with [NTO] actually at the end about, [NTO] said one of the questions people ask, "What's happened to them now?" And so I wondered whether it was something in the report for the National Trust to think about a collection etc. I mean, I think [NTO] made the point that each individual site has its own autonomy so thinking more trust-level would be harder.**
- R: It's really interesting that, the idea of, and it's something that hadn't occurred to me until I'd taken part in this project but the idea that you commission contemporary art, it's created, it's brought, it's set up, and then what happens to it next? Because if you commission art specifically for your place, for your story, it's custom-made for you and doesn't necessarily work in other places, I think depends on the individual piece and because we're a charity and we're used to doing things on a budget, on a shoestring, and often the idea of commissioning something that's just there for a fixed amount of time and then goes and either gets put in the skip or isn't usable by us again, it challenges our views on value for money, I think. I think it's seen as really, value for money is the wrong word, but it feels quite lavish to be able to pay to do something, have it for a very short period and then it go away again.
- I'm used to buying, I mean, I'm used to managing resources constantly, making them last for a long time and spreading them as thinly as possible. So, it's an interesting one, the idea of what can happen to these pieces afterwards, can they be reused, can they have a life beyond an installation period?
- I1: **That's a very interesting reflection actually that you've just said, which is that thing about it feels as if it's lavish or it's indulgent perhaps.**
- R: That's a better word, I think, yes.
- I1: **So, that begs the question of how do we see the value of the work when it's there and what does it do, rather than seeing it as, I don't know how I'm articulating this but rather seeing it as a commodity or something, it's actually, what has it done when it's gone and what's the value of what it's achieved? What do you think the value is of what it achieved?**
- R: Yes, it's very difficult, this one. It's one that I'm hoping I'll learn more from the report actually, just to go back to your original question, I'd like to know more. My own reflections, I think it's quite difficult, I think these things have a value when they're there definitely but something I've struggled with afterwards is it's what is

the legacy of these things. Just to use Fiona's piece as an example, because that did come and then go again, it arrived, it was there, people engaged with it and it left and it just left, I think it left a bit of a void and over time, we've all forgotten it was even there and the grass has grown back, hasn't it? And it's just not forgotten but yes, as a visitor, there's no continued impact from it. Andrew's piece lasted longer. I think (unclear 00:06:05.3-0:06:06.4) for years and years and years because they could've had a longer term in perhaps in Gibside, but I think from the fixed period, it's very difficult to quantify the impact they have. I think we'd need, well I know we're going to get some research as part of this project but I think it's, for us as National Trust, it's very difficult to monitor the impact of something because there aren't any specific measures with it so other things that we're used to measuring the impact of, we have KPIs, we have measures, so I know what my visitor experience scores are and what they should be and when they dip and when they climb. Same for commercial and conservation, things like that, but for contemporary art, we don't really, we don't have the measures which is one of the things that this project seeks to answer. We definitely did have an impact though while they were on site, definitely.

A lot of people talking about them, a lot of people asking questions about them which, and it starts conversations, so people say, "What are these great big pots for?" And you say actually, they're not just great big pots, they're not just great big pots, they're a contemporary art installation and they're all about the story of Mary Eleanor and it just, I think a lot of the value of them was as conversation starters between, no doubt between all the visitors as well.

I2: That's a really interesting observation actually, sorry to jump back a minute or two because we've talked about this a little bit and I hope there's a question in here but at least I invite your reflection because one of the aims of the artworks and one of the rationale, a rationale for being involved in the programme was to change people's perception around Mary Eleanor Bowes and it's really interesting potentially that what you've just said is that actually it may have done that while it was there but effectively, ultimately it's not had an impact because it's gone, visitors, there is no legacy of it as a work, the work itself even doesn't exist anymore. It will have a life in Fiona's portfolio and, but that's really quite an interesting issue, both perhaps in terms of the visitor impact individually but also a shift in the understanding of Mary Eleanor Bowes at that place. I don't know if I've said that very well.

I1: What I think is interesting that you've just said actually is that of course Fiona is using that work and she goes all over the world giving presentations and she will talk about *Mary Eleanor Bowes* and she will be talking about Gibside, so the impact actually is a secondary impact because the artist is promoting the place as well within that. So, maybe we're not articulating that well in when we're working with heritage organisations is that we're not actually demonstrating that or articulating that which I think is interesting.

R: It's not something that we're particularly aware of so it's never occurred to me really that Fiona's out there sharing our story.

I1: She absolutely is.

R: That's never really crossed my mind actually.

I2: **Which is interesting because that's the model of the Maritime Museum or it was because they used to commission artists but never showed the work in a museum. Deliberately so, there were artworks circulating, disseminating issues to do with the Maritime Museum. So, yes, that is interesting.**

I1: **Sorry. I think that's really... What about the benefits, you were saying about the benefits to, that it was there, and it was on site? What about the benefits to the organisational structure? What about the benefits to you personally and Gibside of going through the process of this?**

R: I think it was a very educational process. I think that for me and for the team, most of which are not here now actually but I think it was very educational process. It's not something we had done before and it was, yes, a very positive experience on the whole.

I1: **Would you carry on?**

R: It all depends on resources, doesn't it? I think Gibside is an interesting example because there's a couple of business-specific things that happened at Gibside over the past couple of years that have affected this which may or may not be appropriate, kind of swings on the data because we did have a drop in visitor numbers last year, in the middle of the year. We actually finished the year, Gibside's grown over the past three years each year, but in the middle of the year, it wasn't looking that way, we were actually behind our budget and things weren't going so well.

So, one of the reasons for that was because we'd put our focus on contemporary art, in doing that, we'd inadvertently lowered the attention going into some of our core programming which is where our growth has come from. So, for example, school holidays and family events, weekends and things. So, we're focusing on one thing which has our attention off something else and the something else in our case is the things that pay the bills. And I'd say that was a kind of not wholly deliberate choice but it just kind of happened. I've forgotten the question now, [I1], but that—

I2: **Would you carry on?**

R: Would we carry on? I think our mistake in that sense was that we, rather than adding something new to the programme, we stopped doing some things and started doing some things when what we should've done was viewed this as something that's just extra and not stop doing other things because stopping doing the other things affected the business which is a bit unfair on the art project because, and I certainly wouldn't like to say that we started doing contemporary art and our visitor numbers dropped because that's not, that wouldn't be a fair reflection. That's to do with us as a team and how we plan things. So, I think we would continue doing things. There's some things that we do differently certainly and I think we'd have to think more, if we were doing it sort of independently, I think we'd think a bit more tactically as a business for that, how we did things and

when we did things and what the kind of business benefits would be to each thing, if that makes sense.

I1: Yes. I want to sort of delve that into, because that's obviously coming up with the report thing that is often, when we're talking to heritage organisations or organisations that haven't, they want evidence of the business case, they want evidence that this is going to increase our visitors, this is going to increase their income in the tea room, and contemporary art isn't a commodity like that, it's something very different and it has a more, the depth of it isn't, it's not an event, it's not a firework event.

I2: I think we struggle with that.

I1: It's not an event, it's actually something that is different and that the approach that we have is that it's embedded in programming and it could take time. So, the business case, is that, do you think... what do you think about that?

R: I think I always wished that we were a bit more freed from the kind of the financial restrictions that we have, but we're in the situation that we're in so at Gibside specifically, we're not a wealthy property and we're quite a poor property despite having very high visitor numbers, our costs are so high that we don't, we put very little money in the bank so we don't really have flexible budgets for things. And we're doing some major work to address that in the next few years, but we have to look at everything on a cost-benefit basis. So, you're absolutely right, it is very difficult to quantify the benefits of things like contemporary art and that makes it very difficult for us to kind of proactively, I suppose, prioritise it because we are managed on, well we have to continue our existence so just to use a really basic example, if I were to choose between, at Gibside, our core audience is families, probably about 80% families.

If I choose to focus on adult audience which distracts my attention or my team's attention from that core audience, I'm effectively choosing to put the business at risk, which is, kind of, as I described previously about what happened in the past couple of years. Not because of the contemporary art, because of how we did things as a team. In an ideal world, if I had a programming budget annually that was substantial enough to give me a really high-quality offer, I want to grow my adult audience, I want to grow Gibside's midweek visits and we have got some evidence that during the contemporary art installations, we did grow our midweek audience. It's subjective evidence but when you look at, we've done some analysis over the data and although we had less, we had fewer peak days last year, so a few were sort of 2,000 plus days when we won't have the capacity and our car parks are full, we had fewer of those. But our sort of visitor graph peaks and troughs levelled to some extent. So, it's really interesting. As I say, that's quite subjective data, I'll share it with you because it depends on all kinds of things, weather and all manner of things.

I2: And I do remember, right at the very beginning, you saying you were less interested in growing your weekend audience and more interested in the week, that's really, yes.

- R: So, if money wasn't a problem then I would definitely be pursuing, I think, contemporary one, one of the things that I'd be looking into as a means of actually, that's now shown that we can grow our midweek non-family audience. It's not decisive, I'd need to do more, I want to read this report. But there is a suggestion that it can help us with that but because it's difficult to quantify, it's difficult to pursue, if that makes sense.
- I1: **Just an aside about the report. The report didn't do any sort of data analysis of who was coming in, visitor, it's a bit, it was about the focus groups that sort of their way that they perhaps changed rather than the sort of—**
- R: I'm very happy to share the work that we've done on individual days, dips and troughs.
- I2: **That, I wonder whether that might be interesting for the report actually because, and in a way this is one of the things that we're thinking about which was again about, it's that question about Mary Eleanor, a real shift in people's understanding of Mary Eleanor Bowes as an aim against a kind of an argument that actually the reason to do contemporary art is about different audiences, that it's a business case, which in a way, it doesn't remove that it's about Mary Eleanor Bowes but then that's not the priority. The priority is about visitor management.**
- R: That's what it ends up being. I think the intention is more, is generally to tell a great story and engage people. That's always the intention, I think. We're quite good at that. But because of the way that our business is run, the way our organisation is currently, sadly, you respond to the things that people are knocking on your door about and people are knocking on our door about visit numbers, income, commercial, all the practicalities of visitor management. So, although we certainly go into these things thinking we want to share our story and want to engage people in different ways. Inevitably, I think, it always ends up becoming a bit more commercial which is a shame because that, in my mind, that's contradictory to the spirit that you go into with things like contemporary art, you're doing it for creative reasons, not necessarily business-driving reasons. Don't want to whinge about the organisation.
- I2: **No, I don't think it's a whinge, I think it's actually a reality that it's not just the National Trust, it is tensions.**
- I1: **It is a tension.**
- I2: **And again, it comes back to what we are interested in saying in this report or have thought about relates to that, does relate to the sense of what are the drivers, and not this is simply blindly, "We want people." Or we're not bothered about Mary Eleanor Bowes but actually, there are tensions in the same way that it's very clear that this is really interesting area of contemporary art practice but the contemporary art press tend to ignore it and don't really value it. So, it's kind of if you're end aims are about making really good commissions, that can or ought to be acknowledged, I don't know where I'm going, it's an observation, sorry.**

I1: It's that thing about, there's a thought, there is this sort of positioning about, or the expectations of what these things can do for an organisation and I have to keep, I'm just repeating myself really, it's not an event, and I get back to, and I'll bring it over and over and over again is that the Stella McCartney crystal horse syndrome, which is everybody wants that because they think it's going to drive the visitor numbers up, which it probably does but does it have any depth to it, does it have any, is it really telling the story in a different way, is it really...? So there's that event thing that's going on, and the expectations that things are going to, so there is a thing, I think, in the report, that is being revealed is that the way that, is that relevant, the business case, what should we be saying about the business case, what are the expectations, what should we be saying that is more sort of nuanced, I suppose?

R: I think, in the same that we, I think I've certainly learnt a lot of new language over the process and I'm nowhere near as near as I'd like to but I think we've been trying to learn the language of a different world. So, the contemporary art world, totally new to me, totally new to mean. So, we've been trying to speak your, sorry not your, but your language.

I1: We spent an hour talking about this.

R: So, it's that more academic language and I wonder if, although I don't see it from the contemporary art world side but I wonder if the contemporary art world has felt that it's tried to speak to the National Trust's or our sector's language because things like you can't really talk to us without talking about the business case and the cost benefits because that's what we think about constantly. So, in the same way that we've certainly tried to put aside some of our preconceptions and measurables and KPIs and things in order to free ourselves up to think more like academics, I wonder whether you've found that we've had that from the other side and just the art and the academic side need to speak our language a bit in order to make the relationship work.

I1: I've just been talking about this actually in that, there's so much to talk about, isn't there? The language, first of all, we've just been talking about contemporary art and what happens when you say contemporary art. Immediately, what happens I say to you contemporary art, what do you think?

R: We're different now to what it was two years ago.

I2: Which is a good thing.

R: Yes. I'm not sure really. I imagine you had to go back and check what I said way back then but I imagine I probably said something like, I viewed it a bit suspiciously and wonder what it's all about. Now, I certainly view it more positively and think, just think, I think I'd be more curious I'd think, because I know now it's not just a question of contemporary art, you get a sculpture, it arrives, and Bob's your uncle. I know so much more about the process, I feel like I know more about it, I'm more curious. That's not a very good answer, sorry.

I2: No, but it's really useful.

I1: It's interesting. I mean, I'm sure this chimes with you, is that I've been talking about this half an hour ago is that I believe people take a position. They actually say, "I don't know what that is." Or, "I don't like it." Everybody kind of has, it forces people to take a position, whereas if you don't describe it in that way and you describe, well, what can we do, what's the artist's brief, and what's the brief? The brief is to tell the story of Mary Eleanor Bowes in a different way, and we don't actually say, "We're embarking on a contemporary art programme." We're actually starting with the story of Mary Eleanor Bowes, the story of Gibside, the story of that, and we use that. In a way, I think what I'm trying to say to myself, is there another that we can approach organisations without that sort of language that is quite so loaded.

R: I think something that's really useful for me, and I work on this as part of the whole process with MCAHE was a couple of things, firstly that that piece of art doesn't need to tell a story, it doesn't have to make sense, you don't have to be able to say, "It's this because of this." So, with the whole, it's one of the first things I've heard and it was that it's okay if a piece of artwork just provokes a question.

So, if you come across something, you see it, and go, "What the hell is that?" That's okay because it asks someone a question, there's been a reaction whereas I always thought, I'm sure I said it in one of these early interviews, you look at a piece of contemporary art and you go, "I'm so frustrated by it. What's it about? What's the explanation? Where's the explanation?" Whereas the leaflet tells my why this cube is here and I've learnt that it's absolutely okay and I've used that a lot of conversations with visitors and volunteers over the past couple of years. People say, "What the hell are these big pots all about?" It doesn't matter what they're all about as long as you're asking me about them, it's done its job, so that's my probably biggest learning. The other one, I've totally forgotten what it was now but it was very poignant. It doesn't matter, I've forgotten, sorry, but you're asking me about what—

I1: I was talking about language and how perhaps we can...

R: That was it, sorry. So, firstly, it's okay just for art to ask a question, it doesn't need to be answered. I think that was it. The other thing was it can just be an experience in itself. So, the thing I liked about our commissions were that you could walk around and you could touch them, they were quite interactive. Fiona's, you could look inside it, you could reach inside it, Andrew's, you could touch them and very tactile. And they worked even if all it was was just a child running the hand down one of Andrew's, the texture of it. Even if it was just that, and that wasn't interaction in itself and that was okay. So, I think in terms of speaking our language, we think in terms of, yes, we think financially, but we also think in terms of experiences and I think if a piece of art can be an experience, that means something to us so I recently went to the BALTIC with my family and there's things I liked and things that I didn't like but of the things that I liked, the thing that I liked, I forgot the name of the artist now but it's, you walked through it, so it's a series of cartoons, sort of 2D cartoons but they're all sort of on, it's like walking through a building of a cartoon strip, if that makes sense.

So, you walk through sort of five rooms, I think, and the cartoon changes in each room. And we walked through it about, because it's about maybe 100 yards long, we walked through it about five times just because it was just really. There was just something about it that really interested both me and my partner because it was quite simple and we understood what it was about which I just said isn't important but it is experiential. So, the five times that we walked through it, we noticed something different and I think, and my National Trust brain, even on a day off, kicks in and says, "This sort of thing, really good at Gibside." So, yes, I think in terms of experience, that works for us. Because I think we're more comfortable talking about experiences than we are talking about our stories sometimes, if that makes sense.

I1: Yes. Do you want to...?

I2: I mean, no, you look like you were going to.

I1: It's just that I want to get back to you talking about the continuation of it and not having the resources to do that. And I remembered, I keep remembering when we were selecting the artists, that you were particularly animated about the selection of the artists and actually you were particularly animated about one piece that we didn't have.

R: Mira Calix.

I1: No, it wasn't [Artist's Name], it was actually [Artist's Name's] piece which was, I think, a big velvet, something like a big velvet heart or something like that.

R: I can't remember.

I1: That's really interesting because you were very saying that you would like to do that. If you couldn't do it this time round, you wanted to do it the next time round. And I'm just thinking of that thing about resources is that of course, there's another way of looking at this in that if that experience, if you really saw the value and really wanted to carry on, the resources would come to you because you would make a, there's other funding sources that you could go to to make that happen. So, I'm just wondering why it's kind of stopped for you.

R: Yes, it's a very reasonable point. I'm not sure I can answer. I mean, force myself into an answer, I suppose, we haven't prioritised continuing it. I suppose we haven't made it a priority. Why haven't we made it a priority? I think because, I think it comes down to that making a business case side of things and things that I'm measured on, things that I'm tasked with are around performance and numbers and I don't think, well obviously we've not, we haven't come off the back two installations and said, "Right, we must do that again." We just haven't, it's a fact, I suppose.

I1: I'm sort of thinking why—

R: I'm thinking to think if I can compare it to something else. I mean, I manage our events manager and if we do a new event, I know you're making a distinction on events, but if we do an event, a new event, and it worked really well, the first thing I'd say to events manager is, "When are we doing that again?" And no matter how difficult it was or how complex it was, I'll say, "If it works, find a way of doing it."

I2: So, when you say event, can you give an example of an event?

R: A real example, this year, we worked with Sunderland Astronomical Society to put on a stargazing evening, okay. So, we did that in the summer and then we met with them yesterday and I was very animated in the meeting, trying to persuade them to do it again twice next year because I really want to do it again. It's a different sort of thing but it's an example of how, I suppose, I could've done nothing about getting the astronomers back to do another event but I didn't, I made a point of going to the meeting and putting a lot of effort into selling it to them. And I support you could say that I haven't gone out and done the same with contemporary art.

I1: It's important.

R: I don't feel negatively about contemporary art.

I1: No, you're not saying anything that I haven't, that people haven't said before to me, and it's as a curator working within the (unclear 0:32:47.6) sectors, in that often those expectations are it's going to bring... it's like an event.

R: Can I ask you a question about, I'm aware of Fountains Abbey and the work they do, and they have continued their folly programme for several years. Is it still running?

I1: Yes.

R: So, they obviously have tried something, a series of commissions, and they've found it successful because they've done it year after year. They've got loads of money as well apparently. But yes, I was going to ask you, what made them keep—

I1: There's a key word that you said there which is successful and I think I would say is they've seen the value of it which is that it is doing something very different, it's not doing that sort of income. I mean, I'm not there at the moment but the conversations that we have had for that is that they made a decision to invest in a programme that went on for three years and obviously they've then seen the value of it which is not that it's an increase of, it's more of an embedded value which are the hidden things about attracting, perhaps giving something another, an audience that might not come or highlighting an area that might not, so it's not that straight case, I think. So, it's the value rather than success and that's another, I mean, that's interesting is what is success.

I2: Which was one of our question originally, wasn't it?

I1: Yes.

I2: I mean, you'll be aware of the Cragside. It wasn't part of the MCAHE, was it, the Cragside commissions last year?

R: No.

I2: But the whole Cragside cover up and there was a big media controversy around that one. And I watched that really closely and I thought we'd got our communications wrong with that but I thought we should've stuck to our guns but that's just me. But that was really interesting and I don't know whether that's been, that's was a separate, that wasn't part of the project, but I think that'd be really interesting case study in terms of success because you could look at that, if I'm the general manager of Cragside, I might think, oh my gosh, that was a nightmare. I don't think [they] would say that, I think [they'd] probably say that having all that controversy was actually a really good thing, I think.

I really liked seeing us in the press with that sort of thing because I think it forces people to ask questions about what we're here for and people that'd say, I was trying to explain it to my parents at the weekend actually, I was talking about the Cragside cover up, trying to explain it to my Dad who's got quite traditional values and I knew I wasn't going to win but I was trying to explain covering up all the male statues and male features in order to highlight the fact that there weren't many references to women in the country house experience and he kind of said, "I understand what you're saying there but I disagree with things that try and change history." The only reason that all the paintings are of men is because they wrote the history and commissioned all the paintings. It's not changing history. History's probably wrong in this case. There have been lots of women around for a fairly long time. And yes, I'm not sure what I'm going on with, but I just think the Cragside examples will be an interesting case study.

I1: There's an example of success that you're having a conversation with your father about Cragside and that and that whole thing. So, I think that's the thing is actually really revealing those things that happen which are, that it goes on, that you're having a conversation about it. I mean, again, it's what is success because if you look at that project, increase numbers, it appeared in the press, raised the profile of Cragside, raised the profile of the issue that was ongoing. So, it actually was massively successful.

R: And the reason there was a success about that was the way that our press office handled it. I think, I forget the specifics but there was a big controversy after we did what we did with the Cover Up and I think we ended up backing down whereas it would've been a really good opportunity for us to say, "You know, actually, we have done this and we stand by it."

I1: And it would've been a different story.

R: I'd almost like to have something that it'd be difficult to manage for the team there, it would've been a very difficult time for them and I sympathise but I'd actually

quite like to have that level of, in some ways, I was a little bit disappointed, I think, that we didn't have more controversy at Gibside because I want to have that debate with people. If people want to say, "Why are you telling this story?" Or, "Why are you saying that?" I want to say, "Because that's our purpose as an organisation."

I2: Yes, sorry. I was just going to say, I think you would've been, I think I would certainly have applauded the National Trust had they done that but also, I think that we've kind of reflected because I'm aware of lots of other really controversial, difficult exhibitions that I've been involved and I think one of the issues there is around negotiation of what actually happens, because I think the Cragside was a beautiful piece of work but I think actually could've been managed better, both in relation with the artist, the installation, to mitigate against some of those quite actually predictable responses, "I've paid to get in." So, I think again, it is the negotiation, the relationship with the site but also I think you're right, it's the commitment of the site that they can and want to do this.

R: Just another important point (over-speaking 0:38:36.8), to backtrack.

I1: No, no, no.

R: In conversations about continuation and in our case, lack of, there's something important that I've forgotten to say which is that throughout the process of MCAHE, this started before, but we've been in the process of commissioning and designing a contemporary garden at Gibside, a radical contemporary garden, I think you've seen designs for it.

I1: Yes, what happened to that?

R: It's still happening, it's just a very slow project but it, we'll be starting work on it next year and because that's always been there and in my opinion, the garden, and the design of the garden, it is a piece of contemporary art, it's a contemporary garden design, it's very artistic. So, in a sense, the learnings from MCAHE have been brought forward into that. So, the way that, just speaking about me personally, the way that I articulate the garden design, and I have to quite frequently defend it because it's contemporary. I certainly use my learning from MCAHE in that. So, when I talk about the garden, in terms of, "Don't worry if you don't..."

People look at it and go, "What's the story?" A bit like e two years ago, "Don't worry about the story. Just experience it and have a conversation about it." And I think it really helps, and because that project's always been there and we're very focused on that as our next creative project, that's no doubt why we haven't, one of the reasons why we haven't pursued other things because we've already got a big contemporary project in the pipeline but I've never really considered actually how learning from MCAHE is, for me personally, it certainly helps me articulate our plans for the garden and why.

I2: Which is interesting because that is both radical and permanent as much as the landscape allowed.

R: So, yes, that's a really interesting point that I've really considered until you made me think about it now but because our garden will be controversial, because we're taking an existing space and turning it into something very different, we've already come across a lot of feedback from, it's not public, the design isn't even public yet but we've had a conversations with volunteers and partners and even staff to kind of make the case for this garden. And it's a very similar conversation as to, "Why have you got big urns in the walled garden?" – a very similar conversation to, "Why have you got to dig up this garden and make something new? What's wrong with how it is currently?" And then I get on my high horse.

I1: **Because that will be a big change and as you say, it could be controversial. So, I guess it's how do your volunteers, how do you prepare for that?**

R: Well we're similar to MCAHE, we've tried to involve them as early as possible and involve them at every stage and have continuous engagement with them. So, it's not just a question of, "We're doing this, what do you think?" We're trying to involve them in it. But you can always do these things better and one of the problems with our garden project is that it's gone on so long that it's now got a bit of, "Oh yes, we'll believe it when we see it" effect because we've been talking about it for six years now so the project started before I started working at Gibside so it's got a big of a lag.

I2: **Which brings me to a question around scale if that's all right. One of the things that we've been thinking about and I've certainly noticed in some of the discussions that the issue of a scale of site is relevant and that scale in all of the ways that that word means, numbers of staff, size of site, scale of audience, and I'm just wondering, and perhaps scale of budget, and in the many ways that that can impact, do you think that has any bearing on either the success or failure or challenges that Gibside experiences?**

R: The scale of the—

I2: **In any form. It might specifically in relationship with those relationship with those commissions or more generally in the challenges you have around running a site or and clearly there's a comparison between Gibside as a very small, intimate and Gibside as a very big—**

I1: **Cherryburn.**

I2: **Cherryburn and Gibside.**

R: I think it's an obvious answer really but yes, because Gibside's a big site, I think the scale is really important. We had two big commissions that wouldn't have fitted in Cherryburn. So, I think the scale's really important. It's something that we think about a lot in terms of whether it's our event programme or our marketing, we always think in terms of scale. I think, because I've visited and kept an eye on the Cherryburn side of the project as well, I think the impact of the project there is far greater than the impact of the project at Gibside because of scale, if that makes

sense. I think you would require a bigger, not necessarily physically bigger but you require a bigger intervention, a bigger property.

So, again, just to come back to our garden design, we've appointed a very well-known garden designer which is in the sense about scale so part of the controversy, we've appointed a well-known controversial designer because that gives[them] size in terms of [their] impact whereas if it was someone unknown and unchallenging, there's design a bit further down the scale, if that makes sense. For me, purely more personal reflection, the scale of our designer reflects the scale of our garden, if that makes sense. I think it'd be wrong for us to have a non-controversial not well-known designer.

I2: Yes, that's really interesting.

I1: Random question, if you had the choice between a well-known artist and lesser-known artist, where am I going with this? Let's say we had the brief, we had the same brief and a well-known artist, this is a random question, a well-known artist responded to the brief with a piece of work but a lesser-known artist responded to the brief with more research and more, where would you sit? This is a mean question actually. This is a mean question but what would you—

R: I run a visitor business so I think I can give a fairly honest answer. I'd have to consider the added scale that I would get from let's say a celebrity artist so if it was someone that I knew would add an attraction. I'd like to think I would also balance it with the quality of what other artists were bringing but if you said, "[R], Banksy wants to come to do some work at Gibside." I'd probably bite your hand off because.

I2: Or Antony Gormley.

R: Yes. It would help me with my day-to-day challenges whereas an unknown artist doing something really, really nice wouldn't necessarily have that impact which feels a bit awful really but I'm being honest—

I1: It was a mean question. No, it was a mean question and it's a dilemma, it really is a dilemma.

I2: Yes, and we all live in pragmatic realities and I think it's better to be honest about them and then say, "Yes, I want a famous artist." But actually, maybe then within that, we can find a space to do something that's low key although it came up at our conference and I forget who it was that said it, whether it was the National Trust or English Heritage but somebody said it's really hard to work small scale because our systems don't allow to do small things.

R: I recently went to Jupiter Artland near Edinburgh and it's a big country park where this area's, sculptural interventions around the place. And that was really interesting because they're all quite, well most of them are quite big interventions, really big things but some of the more, some of the things I enjoyed most were actually the smaller ones and I don't think any of the artists were people that I was

aware of. I'm sure you guys would be. So, there was no kind of celebrity wowing for me, it was all quite neutral, I didn't know who any of the artists were so I was quite... There was one artist that I heard of and I didn't think his piece was actually that good. So, yes, I suppose as a visitor, I don't think the experience of the art isn't necessarily affected by the popularity of the artist. When you're experiencing it, it's just, it doesn't matter whether it's someone you've heard of or not. The best things that I enjoyed both at the BALTIC recently and then at Jupiter Artland were just pieces that I just liked and took something away from regardless of the fact that I knew nothing about the artist.

I1: Now that's interesting.

R: But I might not have, I mean, I went to Jupiter Artland on a work visit because there are comparisons with our new garden. Would I go to something for an unknown name? I don't know. I went to the BALTIC because they've got a baby sensory room and I've got a baby.

I1: But I mean, again, I'm sort of really familiar with this in that it's, again, I have to keep going back, but it's the Stella McCartney versus the Shelley Fox syndrome which is you've got, at Belsay, you've got those two artists making work in response to the same brief, the work of the lesser-known has integrity and depth and research, but the work of the other one is the marketing value so would the audience come if you put Shelley Fox at Belsay? They wouldn't. So, it's that sort of balance.

R: I'm not too familiar with the examples that you've mentioned but I can picture a big crystal horse and I think I understand the point you're making. I think a lot of it comes down to the experience of it. So, as a non-arts background person, I pick my days out based on experience and as an experience manager, I think if something can be experienced then I think people will seek it out so just for example, my example of the BALTIC, walking through a cartoon strip, I just really enjoyed the experience of walking through a cartoon strip and, yes, I always engaged with the concept and a way of thinking something different about something. But with my professional hat on, I thought people would really enjoy this experience.

So I think regardless of not something is well-known, if people talk about it and they say, "Have you walked through the thing at Gibside?" Or, "Have you..." I think experiential things, people seek them out as experiences, if that makes sense whereas things that are just quite I'd say two-dimensional, but I suppose both our commissions were just kind of sculptures, they were just fixed projects in landscape, not a huge amount of experience with them, you could walk around them and touch them.

I1: Yes. I get what you're getting, yes.

R: That could be just me. In the same way that the Antony Gormley, things like the Angel of the North appeal because they're an experience in themselves and I think in terms of the language of the two kind of worlds that we work in, might be talking in terms of experience, I think, can be useful.

I1: That's interesting.

R: I'm going to put some more time on my car if you don't mind.

I1: We're probably nearly finished, aren't we?

R: I think I've already overshoot. I'm just going to put another few minutes on.

I1: All right.

I2: Okay. How do you do it?

R: It's (over-speaking 0:51:25.5) I just do it.

I1: It is interesting. If you think of the Tate, not the Duveen gallery, the Tate Bankside, and you think of works that you view and works that you are engaged with, that's the ones that are memorable, like the Louise Bourgeois sort of sculptures and even the Kara Walker, there's a Kara Walker which I haven't seen at the moment which is a fountain. So, you're sort of engaged with it. There was the, obviously the, what's the work that's just been there with the slide, it was a slide?

R: Carsten Holler.

I1: Carsten Holler and those sort of works that engage you as well. It's worth thinking about that.

R: And something about what mode people are in when they visit our places. So, people come to Gibside, I've already said that we've got a mainly family audience. People come to Gibside for a day out and they come for a fun, sociable experience with their friends and family whilst being in the outdoors. So, that's what they're coming to us for as opposed to if you go to an art gallery, you're looking for something else. If you go to, even Cherryburn or a different Trust property looking for something else. And I don't think we really considered this when we were choosing our artists and things because I think we're thinking purely in terms of picking the right artist and the most interesting option but if you were to think about what are people looking for when they come to our place, I would probably have said, "Well we should have something that's playful and something that people can experience."

And I didn't say those things because we didn't ask ourselves those questions so I think whereas if people come looking for a playful Gibside experience and they've just got something to look at, they're less likely to engage with it whereas if, you mentioned the piece with a slide, if we had a piece with a slide, I can guarantee that it would've been a big, more people would've engaged with it because of our audience and what they're looking for when they're—

I1: So, it comes down to the artist's brief again because I mean, it was very direct and we had to tell the story of Mary Eleanor Bowes but if it perhaps been a bit more open, people wanted to experience the site and the way the

brief is articulated then you're sending that out and giving the message that you're wanting something else.

R: And to be fair to us, I think our brief was to look at a different audience rather than our current audience so I mean, that's fair enough but if you were thinking in terms of if we really want to make this work for a visitor attraction and sell it to the team and make sure it does hit some of our other more commercial objectives, could we have put in the brief something like whatever the piece is needs to reflect Gibside's, needs to reflect our audience and the needs of our audience and what the sort of thing they're looking for. So, if we had had something really experiential like a cartoon strip that you can walk through or a slide or a soundscape or something like that, I can see that having a bigger impact and being easier for me to say, "We should do this again because..." If that makes sense.

I1: **It's really interesting what you've just said which was a huge area which is the needs of your audience. How do you know what your audience needs if you don't try other things?**

R: Which is a very fair question.

I2: **And also, sorry, I suppose this is useful for us to connect up, it's exactly what [NTO] was talking about in terms of the Mark Fairington that you looked at and the Marcus Coates that you sat in and were surrounded by and listened to and it was very clear that that was quite different.**

R: I'd have to go back and look at the brief now, [I1], but I think in terms of every National Trust property's got a spirit of place. So, how much effort, how much attention did we put on the spirit of place in the brief because our spirit of place at Gibside is essentially the joy of simple pleasures and the sweet taste of freedom. And I think both our artists went down the route of that relates to Mary Eleanor so we'll tell Mary Eleanor's story. I'm sure the brief was a lot more complicated than that but the actual pieces that were created, how much did they reflect the spirit of place of the joy of simple pleasures and the sweet taste of freedom.

I1: **It didn't because the brief was very directional. That's one thing that I've learnt from this project is that actually, and we brought it up in the conference, I brought it up in the conference is that the brief from Gibside was very directional. It was very about telling the story of Mary Eleanor Bowes which actually—**

R: Which immediately stops you doing something fun or good, a bit more joyful because it's not a joyful story necessarily.

I2: **And it was connected to women in power, wasn't it?**

I1: **It was connected to women in power. So, which actually for us is really interesting because I think what you think is, and I think quite a lot of the artists sort of struggled with this being very directional. So, anyway, yes.**

R: I think if you wrote a brief that was much more focused on the spirit of place, the joy of simple pleasures, we'd have had a very different set of... I remember some

of the, I don't remember all but the proposed commissions were all, they were all a certain nature, weren't they? They were all very serious, they were all very, quite dark in some cases as opposed to some of the contemporary art that I've seen which is more light, more joyful, more experiential and we didn't do that.

I1: No, because the story was so very dark and the only one that sort of flipped it was Fiona saying, "I'm not going to actually, I actually want to do something more positive about it." It's been interesting to look at those responses.

I2: Just, and I'm happy to email you as a reminder but, and I need to check where I've got this but can we get a copy of your spirit of place?

R: Yes, you should have one somewhere.

I2: Yes, I think we should.

R: Yes, definitely. If I forget, just remind me but it's just a document.

I2: Yes, that'd be brilliant.

R: Very happy to share it.

I1: I'm okay.

I2: Yes. I suppose then the last thing is there anything that we've not covered, anything, because we've reflected on long-term impact, we've reflected on what you're doing next and why it's not specifically contemporary art, we've reflected on the process. Is there anything else that you kind of want to finish off with or that we've missed? Any other questions?

R: Particularly poignant thing to finish with. No, I don't think so. I think we've covered most things. I think the things I came in wanting to talk about, I think we've covered, yes, things like why we haven't necessarily continued but what we are doing next and I do think that the process of MCAHE has certainly helped me and my team deal with our next big creative challenge. It's certainly been useful. And it's certainly changed the way that we think about contemporary art and it's certainly changed the way that I personally think about and engage with contemporary art. I'd love to go back and see what I said for the initial answers but I imagine I told you that I had no interest in contemporary art when we started although I didn't know much about it but I look at it differently now and I don't worry about not knowing about it, I just go in and think, that's a good experience and if I understand it, great, if I don't understand it, what does it make me think, and that's enough.

I2: Yes. I'm just seeing if I can find the transcript.

I1: (Unclear 0:59:38.3).

I2: We did, we had a conversation, didn't we, about this?

- I1: **We did. You said it meant, to mean radical, you thought it meant radical. And you thought that it might not be for the audience, yes. And you said the value of contemporary art was the way of asking questions that we struggle to do and we want to ask more challenging questions and it's a tool to deliver emotional engagement. You also said it was fine, buying from volunteers will be challenge. Yes. That was very useful because we went through, didn't we?**
- I2: **We did, yes. We did.**
- I1: **Yes. So, I mean, yes.**
- I2: **Yes, and I think absolutely, from not, I don't claim to be any kind of expert in contemporary art but I do know that I think that is really important. People are much more comfortable with choosing what music they like, they know I don't like that but I like this. And then spending time with it. But with art, there does seem to be, and maybe it's the contemporary thing but actually, it just needs to be that, that people just think, no, I don't like that, doesn't do anything for me, but that's interesting, what is it? Okay. And so, if we've done that for you and an organisation then I think that's great.**
- I1: **I think we don't articulate the value of doing it in these ways that it carries on which is the conversations that you're having with your father, the way that Fiona is actually presenting Gibside in a very different arena now, in the arts arena. In the Hatton Gallery, there was a huge massive photograph of Gibside, a whole thing about Gibside which is, it's placed in a different place now and it will continue to do that because the artist is taking, and I don't think we articulate that strongly enough in that actually it's not just something that stops, it has got a life that is beyond, and even though it might be seen as well that's the arts, that has nothing to do with me, is that actually, that's an audience and that audience might then go to Gibside so you are actually increasing that audience by different means and it's not just by that time that that art is there and I don't think we, there's something that tells me we're not doing that.**
- R: That just doesn't crop up when you're in the day-to-day business of running a visitor attraction which is part of a bigger organisation.
- I1: **It's short-term.**
- R: You are blinkered onto what's important to you as an organisation and you could read our organisational values and they would probably tell you that contemporary art's exactly what we should be doing as a means of sharing our more difficult stories. But the day-to-day harsh reality of it is not something that's kind of knocking on your door and that's something that as an organisation, we need to start asking questions about, but in the same way that we had the same challenge with the National Trust Everyone Welcome programmes so we're aiming to be more diverse, more inclusive to a diverse audience with the most important piece of work the National Trust has ever done. But it's a constant challenge between wanting to open the doors and be more inclusive between how we actually meet the financial needs of the business.

So, I know that there's loads of, because of where Gibside is, you've got to think about the barriers for some people visiting and engaging with us, it's financial, it's about transport, and it's about paying to get in and what we should do if we're being really, if we're thinking purely in terms of being a resource for the nation, we should find a way of letting people in for free. We can't do that because our financial model is based on membership so it's the same challenge with telling challenging stories, we want to do it but the end of the day, when you're weighing up wanting to tell a challenging story in a creative way versus keeping the roof on, keeping the lights turned on and keeping people, paying people's wages, you come back to the thing that's knocking on your door.

I2: And I think, and I'm really not being critical about your use of the word visitor attractions but I think that's really fascinating to think about a general and my perhaps perception of what the National Trust does and what heritage, it's this whole idea of preserving for the future and preserving for everybody and this is our legacy and this is our heritage and I don't see them as visitor attractions in that sense. I understand the business model for them to exist but to me, visitor attraction is Alton Towers.

R: It's an interesting question, and it's one that I challenge myself on. Am I a visitor attraction manager or am I a heritage manager and I think the way I deal with that is that I've got colleagues who their specific role is to think about conservation and the forever bit? My job is to think about for everyone so in my very simple brain, I compartmentalise it. I know our organisation's safe for the future because someone else is thinking about all the time or a large number of people. My job is to make sure that people visiting now have the best possible time and it's open to a broader range of people as possible. But it's a really good point. I think we're guilty of thinking of ourselves as attractions sometimes. I think you've got to think in those terms in order to run the business but you've also got to have something in the back of your head saying, "You're not Alton Towers." There is a bigger mission. Me, personally, that bigger mission isn't keeping things preserved forever, it's making sure people can, current people right now have got access to it and there's two ways to look at it.

I1: I think it's an absolute tension in the heritage and the arts in that are they a tourist attraction? Is the BALTIC a tourist attraction? Do you go there because you know (over-speaking 1:06:32.3)?

R: Nothing lasts forever. So, if we stop letting people into your building because they're damaging it and the building might last for another 200 years, in the grand scheme of things, if fewer people have been in it, what's the point of having it anyway? So, something without door space, it's like, hang on, what's the point in keeping them special.

I2: Yes, absolutely.

I1: Very interesting. I think that's good. Thank you very much indeed.

R: Thank you. Nice to come back and—

**I1: That's your
[End of Recording]**