

HPS_NT_Gibside_Interview_20_Aug_2018

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KEY:

Cannot decipher = (unclear + time code)

Sounds like = [s.l + time code]

I1: = Interviewer

I2: = Interviewer

R1: = Respondent 1

R2: = -Respondent 2

NT1 = Other National Trust Colleague

I1: We just want your reflections, because as we are going through it's just a reflection of how it is. Is there anything you want to say?

I2: Yeah, it's [I2] and [I1] interviewing [R2] and [R1] from Gibside, is that correct?

R1: Yes.

I2: I always I imagine I am going to say that wrong and say from Cherryburn or something. But, no, okay. So, I guess what we are going to do is broadly follow the themes that we followed last time. And just have a conversation, but obviously perhaps pick up on things that we have come across in other interviews for clarification. But, yeah, a very open reflective conversation, really.

I1: Yeah, okay. Shall I start?

I2: Yeah.

I1: So, we talked last time about contemporary art and you understanding of it. Do you feel that that might have changed from when you started to what you think now about contemporary art? Because we asked what is contemporary art mean to you? And do you see the value of it in presenting it? Has that changed, do you think, now having presented contemporary art within your heritage place?

R2: It has to me. I don't know about you, [R1]

R1: It has me too, yes.

R2: So, that makes me think more about – I can't remember what I said the first time around to that question but, certainly, I am a lot more aware of it, I seek it out in a way that I didn't. And I am a lot more curious about it, I wouldn't say my understanding is any further ahead, necessarily, but I certainly look for it. And I think who did this? And I wonder why they did this and put myself in whoever owns the buildings shoes. [Laughter].

I1: **What about you, [R1]?**

R1: I think for me it's relevance to people that has become much more significant and the way I think about it. I can't remember what I said last time, but I think I appreciate much more than its aesthetic value now and see it as something that can speak to people in a different way.

I1: **Do you think it has encouraged you – you have said that it has encouraged you to be more aware of it – to go and look at it in different settings now? You can be honest, don't say, oh yeah, be honest.**

R2: Yes, to some extent, I can't think of an example. But, I think I have definitely gone and sought things out that I wouldn't have before. I think before I had not really paid much attention to contemporary art if I noticed it happening somewhere near me. But, now I would go and have a look at that and I am interesting to go and have a look at that. I can't think of a specific example that I have sought out, but, yeah, I am definitely more aware of it.

I1: **That is good.**

R1: Similar to [R2], I can't honestly say I have been going to see more art since we started the project but I have certainly taken more of an interest in it professionally and how other places have done it and the kind of responses they have received. And how that compares to our experiences at Gibside.

I1: **Because, of course, Trust New Art is a huge programme nationally and so your National Trust properties are engaging in that contemporary work. So, I think now you have done it you can perhaps have a more personal reflection or interest in that.**

R2: Certainly, outside of this project it has grown in its relevance in the National Trust. In the last six months it feels like it's something we talk about much more and plan for. And it's not a new thing anymore, it feels a lot more like business as usual. I don't know whether that is just because of our experience in it here?

I1: **So, you have gone through that experience. What do you see were the opportunities and challenges or problems in making work in this context?**

R2: I think there are probably lots of dimensions here, but I start, and you can chip in. I think one of the biggest challenges we had was – and I have given this a lot of thought – us, as the operator of the space and, I suppose, the owner of the story and the heritage giving over control to someone else. Is that fair to say?

R1: I think that is fair.

R2: There is a few, kind of, smaller things that I think stemmed from that. Just, for example, If I talk about specifics of a particular piece?

I1: **Yeah, tell me.**

R2: It was quite a challenge to site some of Andrew's work, you know, it was quite a long process to find a suitable locations and suitable fixings that we were happy with and Andrew was happy with. And I think that stems from us having to give over control to someone else, because we are quite use to being very much in control of our own space and our own story. So, I think that was were a lot of the challenges stem from, I thin I think

R1: Yeah.

R2: I feel better for it and there is things happening now, so, for example, I was just talking about the sewing group exhibition in the chapel. There is other things that have happened were we have given over control to someone else, more so than we would have. We are trying to work in a more participatory way generally and this is just one thing. But, it has certainly given us a push to do things differently. [R1]?

R1: Yeah, I would agree with that.

I1: **If we just talk about that for a moment. I think from a contemporary curatorial point of view or an artist's point of view as well. Sometimes you are looking for places that make sense for the work, so those restrictions of you can go here but you can't go here. They do need to be clear right from the beginning, but equally if there is a little bit of give, it would be a really good healthy relationship on both sides. But because sometimes saying the work can go here, or something, and there is a restriction... I think I felt actually – I am going to pitch in – that Andrew's work needed – because it was sculptural – space around it that made sense. Fiona's piece needed obviously – and that wasn't so much of a problem – needed to be next to the Orangery because conceptually it needed to tell the story. So, I think it's a learning thing, I think was a really good learning experience.**

R2: Absolutely, yeah, and not without challenge, I think we have learned an awful lot from it. So, it was a very useful process and I would say that we have already started the planning that learning into other things.

I2: **So, can you be specific about the things you have learned? What have you learned?**

R2: I think probably the value of – a bit like what [I1] was saying. There are things that you can be flexible about and there are things that you can't be flexible about. And having that clear very early on, there is obviously huge value in giving a clean slate and allowing the artist to complete creativity. Because otherwise they can't be creative. But, in this case the specifics of 'where can we get a crane to put the very heavy piece of concrete followed by some very heavy ceramics?' and when we actually got to that point, we knew there were a lot of places that it just couldn't happen. Or there would be a significant challenge to making it happen, and we didn't make that clear at the start. So, Andrew wasn't aware of those restrictions, we weren't either, because I think with Andrew's thinking there wasn't a definite concept yet. So, we weren't able to say you can't have that there, because it

weighs too much. So, there is things on both sides. But I think being clear about – if it's possible – where the red lines are, i.e., you can go here, but you can't go here, I think would be preferable. But, similarly until you know what the thing is, you can't really draw those lines. So, yeah, it's a difficult one, but we certainly think about it more, we think more about red lines and what we can give on and what we can't give on.

I2: **Can I just jump in again?**

I1: **Absolutely.**

I2: **That is a really interesting issue what you have just said about Andrew's work, that he, kind of, didn't know where he was up to and there was still a lot of development to do. So, he almost didn't know what he wanted, so you therefore didn't know what he needed until a lot further down the process. How have you found that aspect of working with an artist? I.e., that they don't know what they are going to do?**

R1: From a programming perspective, it's very unnerving, we have to plan things over a year in advance. And that is the way I have to work to hit the deadlines we have to meet. So, the challenge in working in a much more loose way and having vague ideas was very challenging for me, I am not used to working in that way. But, that doesn't mean it doesn't work. It just made me reflect a lot on our internal processes and just how tight we have to keep everything. And actually, the fact that we pulled something off that has been a great success and has made an impact on our visitors. But, without sticking to those very tightly regimented deadlines and programming schedules has felt like a real breath of fresh air.

R2: It has made us really question some of our internal systems, hasn't it?

R1: It has, yes.

R2: Because I was having a meeting with some of our lead marketing people and the whole shift towards – not just necessarily – contemporary art but working in a more participatory way. So, kind of, giving over control to other people to help us tell our stories really pushes us to question some of the mechanisms that we use. Things like marketing, for example, so like I say, [R1] has pushed to write a programme a year in advance, so we can hit marketing deadlines. When we work like this we work with partners who are not always able to conform to that because there is creativity going on, or things aren't decided yet. So, we have started to question at quite a high-level some of our mechanisms for things like marketing. Because there are ways of doing it, you know, art galleries are able to. But, the biggest thing for me and [R1] was the lack of photographs.

R1: Yes.

R2: So, we didn't have photographs of the finished art – obviously because it hadn't been created – yet we are under pressure to create leaflets to advertise it and make visitors come and see it. You know, obviously galleries have been doing this for a long time and there are other ways of doing it without having pictures. But, the National Trust is used to having pictures of its own stuff, because most sites have been there for 500 years or something. So, yeah, that has really pushed us which has been great. And that challenge is continuing, it's not just come from this, but it has been a good shove.

I2: That is really interesting. And one last question because I was really struck by something you said at the beginning of that, that I want to clarify a little bit. You said being the owner of the heritage and the stories we tell.

R2: I regret that now, actually. [Laughter].

I2: So, was that actually in the legal sense as in you own this property and you need to look after it? Or is it a sense of owning the narratives that are told about it?

R2: Okay, as it came out of my mouth it felt really uncomfortable, actually. I think I meant as the operators of the property as opposed to owners of the heritage in a more metaphorical sense.

R1: Yeah, as the custodians, you know, it's probably...

R2: Yeah, thank you, [R1]. The operators of the business, I suppose. I think the heritage itself is owned publicly.

I2: Yeah, I was just curious of what you meant. And assumed it was about...

R2: I think operator would be a better term than owner.

I2: Yeah, that is what I was assuming, but...

I1: So, [R1], I just want to go back to something you said, only because it's interesting for me. In that it's quite scary when you don't know what is coming, and you are right, this is a tension that happens when you place a new work. If you know what the work is like and you are placing it you, kind of, know what you are getting. Like, if [Name] was to come, you would know – the operational things would make you very tense – what the product was like. Product, have I just said that? [Laughter]. What the art is like. So, that is a bit scary. Now, do you think you need support as that is going through? I will tell you why I am saying this, it's because obviously in my other role – not in this research – when you do these sites for specific commissions you hit – I can always tell when it's coming – a wobble, when everything starts wobbling because they don't know what the work is. And everyone starts imagining all sorts of stuff. Do you hit that? Do you think you hit a wobble where you started thinking, "I don't know what this is going to be like? And I am worried about it"

R1: Yes, I think you have hit the nail on the head there. You know, it got to a point where I think we all panicked a little, I think that is when we started having the conversations about negative visitor experience scores, wasn't it?

R2: Yeah.

R1: And our visitors are going to respond negatively to this. But, yes, we had a wobble. And perhaps knowing that we were likely to have a wobble might have prepared us for the wobble.

I1: See usually what I would do is, sort of, almost like hold the hand and go we are going to get through this. And you have just got to trust – and again I do

probably, I don't know, you may or may not – the professionalism of an artist.

R2: I think we were quite closely involved as well, weren't we?

R1: Yes.

R2: So, because we had helped to select Fiona and obviously we have know Andrew since the start of the process. I think we felt that nothing was going to be a huge shock, I don't think. I think we always knew what we were going to be getting in, you know, we knew Andrew was talking about giant ceramics. And we knew that Fiona was talking about a sculptural piece. It wasn't unknown in that sense. I think we knew more about one piece than the other, one piece was finished at concept in terms of we knew exactly what it was going to look like from the concept stage. One piece developed a lot more in terms of location and size and scale, yeah.

I1: Do you think that not being involved in the selection at the beginning with Andrews, but being involved with Fiona's... Can you say a little bit about that?

R2: Yeah, I think it definitely made a difference for us and how we felt about it. I think we really enjoyed being part of Fiona's selection and that gave us real confidence in the piece. I think with Andrew's piece obviously we weren't involved in the selection, we just knew that we were going to be working with Andrew and that we would be having one of his pieces. But, I think we probably felt – I hate to say more positive – a lot more involved in Fiona's. and that I think felt more comfortable. I think when there were challenging times on Andrew's piece, we inevitably fell back to thinking, you know, we didn't choose this. That is a fleeting moment that passed, but, yeah, I think it's really important to say that. Does that feel fair?

R1: Yeah, that feels fair.

I1: That is interesting.

R2: We love Andrew's piece, you know, his work went really well. But, it certainly gives you more confidence, I think, being involved in the process. I think we felt more engrained in Fiona's, whether that was the process, you know, it got built on site as well and we did some of the painting ourselves. I am not sure, but I think we sort of felt more like we owned Fiona's, I think.

I1: For research, that is quite interesting, that sort of thing.

R2: Yeah, another reflection, sorry, it came up the other day. A colleague offered another contemporary art piece that is currently somewhere else that is part of the Great Exhibition of the North and it's looking for a home. And someone said would you like to home this at Gibside? It has got a relevant story and links in to your industrial heritage and we thought about it. But, the reason I mention it is because what we have found out through doing this project is that doing work commissioned for Our Place inspired by Our Place and responding to Our Place, we feel very positively about that. And it has, kind of, made us feel the other way about borrowed art work, so something that is commissioned for somewhere else and telling a different story. So, we decided not to progress with this other piece

because it was a borrowed piece telling someone else's story. And I think only because we are a National Trust property and we are all place and the spirit of place built into our brains from day one. It has really cemented that feeling, and actually if we are going to have contemporary art it should tell our story. And possibly even be commissioned for our place, opposed to borrowing it from someone else. Does that make sense?

I2: Yeah.

I1: Absolutely.

I2: And it's hugely relevant as well.

I1: It is really good.

R2: I am not sure if we would rule out a pre-created piece if it was the right thing and it could tell parallel stories, for example. But I think we would certainly throw a more critical eye over something that is not commissioned for our place.

I1: That I think is a really positive reflection.

R2: You mentioned there was a mix, which is another really good example, of again it doesn't matter what that piece was or could be, I am sure it's fantastic. But, it would have been a piece created for somewhere else and dropped into Gibside, and that didn't happen for various reasons. But, one of them could be that it just wasn't quite right for us.

I1: Yeah, you are being used as a backdrop.

R2: Yeah, and I think we feel that our place deserves to be not a backdrop.

I1: That is really good, actually. I think they have answered both.

I2: Yeah.

I1: I think we have done the first bit. We are straying off, but never mind.

I2: Yeah, I suppose actually these questions are about the commissioning process and we have talked a little bit about that. So, any other reflections around that would be useful. And I guess it's a prompt just to think a little bit more about that working relationship with the artist specifically. Can you say a little bit about how that has been? The whole kind of working process with both artists through the projects?

R2: I think it has been very positive on the whole, I think we have enjoyed it and learned a lot from it. I think it's important to say that it has not been without challenges in terms of the relationship with the artist, I think that is fair to say and I am sure if you are speaking to them as well, they will probably say we have been a nightmare/ [Laughter]. So, yeah, there has definitely been times when I would say there has been conflict. But, not insurmountable, I think it's a lot to do with that thing of us giving over control, I think. I have already said the siting of Andrew's piece was probably the biggest challenge, I think. That whole process, you know, because it got to a point where we felt we didn't have the information that we needed early on. And I know that is because the creative process was a

long one. And it got to the point where suddenly we knew what it was and what was needed. And I think we felt like if we could go back in time we would have probably said that that wasn't a great idea. Because of the size, weight and locations, but we found a way of making it work and it has been fantastic. And I hope Andrew feels the same.

I1: What about the planning permission? What happened with that in the end?

R2: So, we have got planning permission for both our pieces, it was difficult because of the detail coming in – which we would say was late. You know, we would have liked to have all the information about the size, location, specifications, materials along time before we actually had. So, we had to do it in a quick turnaround which meant that it was difficult, but we did it.

I1: What about Fiona's? Because I know there was quite a lot of miscommunication about what she was supposed to be providing.

R2: Just remind me?

I1: Fiona's one – the planning she suddenly had to give some drawings. You probably weren't involved in all of that.

R2: I was, yeah, scale drawings?

I1: Yeah, suddenly and that came... She sort of went, umph, what?

R2: Yeah, I would say it wasn't suddenly, actually. I mean, it always comes down to who sent what email, when. But, I think we felt like that wasn't a sudden request. I think we always expected those drawings, maybe – and I can't remember – we didn't explicitly ask for them, but we expected them. Which makes an interesting point, I think we expect a high-level of detail and a high-level of specification quite early on. And I think on both pieces we found that – maybe this is part of the greater process – we couldn't have that high specification early on. Which is why things like planning permission we felt like we had to turn things around quite quickly. Does that sum it up?

R1: Yeah, I think so.

I1: It is interesting because reflection on artists and architects, because for architects it's fully about specification and they know how to do that at the beginning.

R2: Yeah, that is really interesting. And I think it's also really important to emphasise that part of the purpose of this project is to look at ways at better supporting, better enabling, better commissioning. So, while it possibly feels uncomfortable and saying we didn't know this, and we didn't know that. It is important that we understand that, so we do encourage a genuine honesty which is reassuring you. That is actually what we do need to learn, really.

I2: Yeah.

R2: Because one thing that is really important to say in terms of the relationship with the artist is that support role. So, I think it's fair to say that it wouldn't have been

half as smooth as it was without the very close support we had from the project team. And also, [NT1] in the National Trust, [their] role came into play half through this project. So, having a member of staff on our side – it's not about sides – who has got our interests as their priority specifically to work on contemporary art projects. And to provide the expert support from our side was really important and the project included, as well. I don't think we would have managed it by ourselves if there was less support. Having that interaction between property and the artist – there was definitely room for something in between. It was really important to have that support.

I1: That is really good to hear because I think it's really important as well and I think [NT1] was key when there was some specifically tricky situations. I can remember one with Fiona being really – on a Saturday – exhausting, or something happened, and [NT1] came into force. I think you are right, the reflection of that is really interesting.

R2: Which reminds me of something else, actually. So, far I have talked about the challenge – and there is loads of positives as well – of Andrew's pieces. You have just reminded me that was probably the most challenging thing with Fiona's piece as well, the install I think Fiona had – for whatever reason – assumed a level of input from the property teams end that we weren't aware we had committed. So, we got to a point that day where Fiona felt like she hadn't had as much support in the install as she was promised. And we hadn't created that support because we didn't know it had been promised. That could have been miscommunication, again, who sent what email when. But, I think it felt quite important at the time, didn't it?

R1: It did.

R2: And once we knew she felt how she felt, we actually jumped in and [R1] and I were both painting plants. And we got some volunteers support drummed up and we got things done. But, it got to the point didn't it where...?

R1: I think it was about managing the expectation of the volunteers help as well. So, initially Fiona felt the volunteer team would just be there and she could say, can you just come and help for a bit? And that they would be available to do that. We probably didn't communicate that when the volunteers come in and they come in and, in their mind, they are here for a specific job that they have signed up for and then they go home. And that is how they like to work, so, yeah, it took us drumming up that volunteer support and really explaining to the volunteers how significant the project was to get them on-board.

R2: And there were a few additional days from us as well to get plants painted.

R1: Yes.

I2: I think that is an interesting point, and again it's one – I picked up a little bit on this earlier – about the nature of understanding what making an artwork is. And that a lot of it is speculative. Fiona said herself that she had never painted plants before, so she didn't know what that involved. And it's interesting that you use the example of a gallery, you know, but that nature of what making art is, is a very developmental thing. And Fiona said she may never paint another plastic plant, I have no idea.

R2: I don't think she will now. [Laughter].

I2: **And that goes right back to what you were saying about the challenges for the trust are about what we are used to is knowing very early on what is going to happen. Or what an architect is used to is thinking through those kind of specifics earlier and that is not to argue or suggest that artists are lacking in something. It actually suggests that what an artist does is a very different kind of making and thinking process, which is hugely valuable. But how we support it and work with it is a really interesting thing. So, it is just really interesting that that issue to think through it is a really positive thing to do, I guess that is what I am saying.**

R2: One of the conversations that we had at the time – correct me if I am wrong about this – was after that specific day, I think Fiona's expectation was that there was going to be an army of volunteers sat around waiting to be given a job. And we know that if we had talked about it in advance we would have told her that wouldn't be the case. But, I remember afterwards we said what we should do in the future with these kinds of things would be to set up a specific volunteer team or a task group. A bit like what has been done with the focus groups for this. If we had set up a group early on and we asked all our volunteers, right, we need a ten-man contemporary art team who will support the creation and installation of a contemporary art piece. We will need painters, we will need joiners and we will need gardeners. I am confident that we could have pulled together that team early on.

R1: Definitely.

R2: It was the fact that we were doing it at the last minute and it was too late. But, again, it comes back to the fact that we didn't know we need painters, joiners and gardeners early on in the process. So, they are two very different ways in working, but I feel totally confident that we could have pulled together that team and the volunteers would have got really engaged in painting the plants, for example. And I think we would have been able to do a really good job of engaging the volunteers, because that is what we do. And Fiona wasn't able to.

I1: **I think that is a really good reflection. If you take Fiona out of the equation with what you have just said, to get the volunteers aware of that it's different working with an artist. When you have an artist on-site creating a piece of work, it's not like it just appears. I mean Andrew's appeared, but Fiona's was actually created on-site and that is different. And I think that is a different relationship.**

R2: Yeah, and what did happen was people did start joining in, didn't they?

R1: They did.

R2: Not in the numbers that Fiona was hoping, but the people had nothing to do with it whatsoever just started walking over to Fiona and asking if they could join in? it was completely organic, and once we saw that we encouraged them more. But, it did happen organically, didn't it?

R1: It did. And it was fantastic, even the most cynical at the start of the week, by the end they were there helping and carrying, and it was just great to see.

R2: Yeah, we had some quite gardening volunteers who would never have engaged with the idea of contemporary art. I am thinking about one [person] in particular – I won't say [their] name – who is really quite traditional in [their] view of volunteering. And, yeah, if I had said to [them] do you want to help make a contemporary art installation? [They] would have said no, but on the day, [they] saw there was a job of painting the wooden boxes. And I had a conversation with [them] about how in [their] spare time [they were] a set designer for amateur dramatics and [they were] really interested, and [they] said, "I will do that if you want, I will give you some of my time"

I1: **Fantastic.**

R2: And I didn't know that about [them], so [they have] got a whole set of skills that I didn't know about. I had assumed [their] feelings of it would be grumpy. And I think the finished product [they] probably wouldn't be very interested in, but [they were] really keen – and [they] asked me – if [they] e could get involved in doing what I was doing. So, yeah, it was a lovely few days actually, stressful, but...

R1: It was, yeah.

R2: And some really good stuff happened as well.

I1: **I think that is a really good reflection if we were doing it again or something is how you would structure, or plan is to actually saying we need the volunteers to know that it's not just going to appear. It is a process that people need to be involved in, I think that is really interesting.**

R2: Similarly, with Andrew's piece – again, this happened at far too short notice – but Andrew was keen that one of the pots would be gardened by the volunteers and it happened at too short a notice for them to do a really good job on it. But, once a couple of key volunteers understand what was needed and what they could do, they got really into it. I am thinking about [Name]

R1: Yes.

R2: And they have attended to it ever since. Again, I feel like we could have done a much better job on it if we had known about it earlier on. And we could have got the right volunteers engaged and maybe we could have had more, which I think is what Andrew wanted. But, I think our frustration was we felt like we could have made that happen so well, if we had been thinking about it six-weeks earlier.

I2: **And some of that might be, you know, obviously as we are reflecting on our process and our timing.**

I1: **It is timing, I always say if you are doing a really big project that you need two-years at least. It is always time, everyone always ends up scrambling around at the end.**

I2: **What do you think the best element of the commissioning process has been so far? Is there anything that sticks in your mind as a particularly strong part of the commissioning process?**

R1: What do you mean? Sorry.

I2: So, just in this process – I guess the question is – what were the best elements of this process? And how might this be improved in the future? But, I guess, what has been the highlight?

R1: For me I very much enjoyed the commissioning stages. The first time we looked at all the artists' proposals, and just those glimpses of the different ways that different artists might interpret Gibside's story at Gibside. In a creative way that we had never worked like before and it was eye opening. And it was fantastic thinking there is all these things that we can do or that other people could do here. And it was a really special moment, and to know that a story very close which is very close to our team which we talk about every day had been responded to by such enthusiasm by others as well is very rewarding.

I2: Yeah, that is really interesting.

I1: It is good that bit, isn't it? You sort of want to do it all over again and say never mind that we haven't got any money to do it. [Laughter]. But that process is always very exciting to see. And I think confirms that you have a very strong story to tell at Gibside, and a very special place that you can just go on and on if you had loads of money to do it.

R1: Yeah. And just another general reflection is how much we have learned, I suppose not as specific part of the process, but as a general outcome of the process for me the best bit is stepping back on reflecting how much we have developed as a property team. And then personally how much I have learned through the process as well.

R2: And how much time it takes, it has specifically taken a lot of your time, which is fine because we have made space for it this year and it has been a strategic decision to make more of [R1's] time available for this. And we have not done other things on purpose, and it has been incredibly worthwhile. But, it has taken a long time and more than we thought, a lot more than we thought. I think if I had a highlight – I agree with [R1] – it would be that commissioning stage, but maybe because it's the first time we have done it. I think in terms of the most important stages on reflection I think the creation of the brief – the co-creation of the brief – was really important. The fact that we – obviously the brief is an incredibly key document – had our input into it early on. I think if we hadn't had a really strong input into the brief there would have been a lot more conflict and a lot of trouble on the way, so I think it was really important that happened. And that set the scene for a quality process. I think – as [R1] said – being shown other ways of telling our story and I have certainly learned that we try and tell far too much of the story in most the interpretive projects that we do.

What contemporary art has shown us – not actually giving us but being made more aware of other things around you – is that you only need to tell tiny little bits, or even just make one point. And it can take a massive intervention to get one tiny bit of information – or make people think about one thing. But, yeah, I often think we try and tell the whole story. And to me I think contemporary art try's to send people away thinking one thing differently. Which it can do, and it works. A recent example of that is I have been up to Cragside – have you seen the sunflowers?

R1: No, I haven't seen the sunflowers.

R2: So, they have done a project with the University, actually, there is a series of different technical and 'sciency' interventions, but one of them is an artist – actually I think from here – has planted 4,000 sunflowers which look amazing as a spectacle in itself. But, with the stories they are representing 4,000 women whose names were lost in history working in Armstrong's factories. And they have just got no names, history has forgotten their names. And it had such an impact on me, I came back in a good mood, didn't I?

R1: You did.

R2: And I only went away with one line of historical information, but I was thinking about something totally different. And one of the words I used when I was discussing it with my team was that I came away feeling a bit guilty, as a man in history that that had happened. And I got far more from looking at some sunflowers for five minutes than I would have reading the book or going on the guided tour.

I1: That is such an interesting reflection.

R2: And it took 4,000 sunflowers to make me think something differently, but it did.

I2: And for me that is what is at the heart of what is so valuable, because it's that feeling that, yes, that could have been written down and you could have read that. But, to experience it in that way is really something that is fundamentally different and powerful. And can actually be a very positive of something that has actually come out of a negative story. So, I guess the follow-on question – in a way I think you have just answered - is around contemporary art in heritage sites and its relationship to interpretation. So, I guess I am seeking affirmation that what you have just said that it has really changed how you think about interpretation. Is that right?

R2: It has certainly changed the way that I think of interpretation, definitely. I wouldn't say specifically our pieces have achieved the pinnacle of what I was just talking about. I think I probably notice that more in other pieces, but the process of our pieces have certainly played a role in changing the way I think about interpretation, definitely.

I1: What about you, [R1]?

R1: One reflection in terms of interpretation from our project is that a lot of feedback we received from our volunteers and visitors is, oh, it's nice, but what is it about? And for me that was somewhat frustrating because that wasn't the reaction I wanted or expected. So, yeah, it made me really think about, well, yeah, how do we interpretative things that we don't want to give heavy interpretation to? I know with the art, we didn't want to heavily label them and have big panels explaining what they were all about. That didn't feel an appropriate way of explaining it, but it's what our visitors were expecting.

I1: Have the panels gone in now? Have the interpretations...?

R2: They are going in.

I1: Well, see what happens then, because I agree that to have Fiona stand in front of that piece and talk about it, obviously made you really reflect upon it

in a very different way. And once you have been involved in that, you can't not be involved, you can't see it without that. And I think to see it without that would have been a very different experience. So, I think it will be really good to see what happens now the interpretation panels are in.

R2: And that is something else that developed along the road, I think originally, we were very keen to put interpretation panels in and say right, we need to explain these things. Because we know our visitors are right, we know they will say, it's is very pretty, but what is it all about? And the project team and the artists reassured us that actually it's okay, it's fine not having interpretation panels, it's not an interpretive project. And we were okay, that is fine, we will let people experience it. And then further down the line we have come under pressure from the artist who has said actually, "I want some interpretation panels in because people are saying what is this all about? And I am not bringing it up as an, "I told you so, thing."

I1: **You can say that.**

R2: Well, I don't want to, that is not what it is. It is really interesting, isn't it? That we were really happy with the steer of it's okay because it's artwork and people need to interpret it in their own way without having it explained to them. And yet with our two pieces there has been some information necessary, I think, to make people enjoy it or understand it – not necessarily understand it because it's not about understanding it – but people haven't really been able to experience it to its full potential without a basic knowledge of it. Like you say, you see Fiona standing in front of her piece talking about it you get a totally different experience than someone who might just walk past it and go...

I1: **What is that about?**

R2: Yeah.

I1: **Because there is the films, have you seen the films?**

R2: No.

I1: **The films are great, to have those somewhere would have been great.**

R2: The overwhelming feedback – and we got this from the focus group as well – from our volunteers and staff is, yeah, it's all right, but can we have some more information about it? We have been asked to death about what the story is. And we have been really good at battling away and saying, we are not going to tell you what the story is, it is what it is.

R1: Yeah.

I1: **Yeah, put those panels in and see what happens. I mean, there is always a tension in the arts about that, I tend to want to put interpretation, but other people don't – our curators don't.**

I2: **I think The Fountain has got it right, the panels there I think are really good. And they are not too close, they are far enough away so there is some information there if you need it. But there is enough space for the artwork to**

work, you know, I think sometimes sites get that – I am not talking about the National Trust particularly – wrong. And you get a panel right in front of the piece of work. But I think at Fountain's that works really well and it's far enough away for them not to be overwhelming.

R2: I was really struck by the Craggside sunflower installation and they had a very simple interpretive panel next to the installation – it was only six lines. And it just gives you enough, it's just enough information to understand what you are experiencing. And it's really nicely presented, it's obviously part of the artwork, it's not a National Trust branded thing, it's branded as part of the artwork. And it just gives you a little bit, just enough without being an explanation, it's just an interpretation of what you are looking at.

I1: **Can I get this interpretation thing? The leaflet that you had, how has that worked? You know, your leaflet, have people been picking it up? Because that, sort of, adds something, I am quite curious about that.**

R1: Yes, so upon arrival everybody was offered a leaflet and our visitor welcome team did a good a job of saying, here is a leaflet and we have some art, go to the walled garden and you can see it, and this is the leaflet that goes with it. It is then difficult to know whether people are actually looking at that leaflet or whether it just goes into their handbag and is never seen again. We put some leaflet boxes either end of the walled garden with the art leaflets in them, just as a secondary touch point for people who had maybe gone into the garden and missed the leaflets. And then wanted to find out more. And I think people took them from those, a lot, so I think they were being well received in the vicinity of the artwork. So, rather than upon arrival when people are thinking about other things. And that is just a reflection on how we work normally, and we are used to using our visitor-facing reception welcome team to give out leaflets. And perhaps we should have considered different ways of doing that.

I2: **You have raised another very interesting point and I can say this because we are confidential. There was some internal issues with this with the art team, is it okay if I talk about this?**

I1: **Yes, it's okay.**

R1: Can I talk about this?

I2: **Yeah, yeah.**

R1: So, I felt that I had given a really good introduction to our visitor-facing team about what the art was, why it was here, why it was significant to us and the information to visitors about enjoying it. However, the information I gave wasn't adequate and our visitor welcome teams fed back quite strongly that they didn't know what they were supposed to be saying. They didn't know it was a priority to talk to visitors about it. Yeah, and that was quite an internal sticking point for me, yeah, it was a shame. Do you want to add anything, [R2]?

R2: I just want to say...

I1: **What happened?**

R2: Yeah, I want to add to it because [R1] is doing [themselves] a disservice, here. The debate was that I thought [R1] had done an adequate job – sorry more that adequate. I think [R1] did a great job of communicating the project and you were part of the whole process. And I thought we had done a great job of communicating the project, what it was about, what the properties would be in the projects and why it was a priority. And what happened was we discovered that leaflets weren't being given out in reception as much as I thought they would be. It wasn't being prioritised by the visitor-facing team, mainly because they have got a 100 jobs to do, so there is not criticism of them. But I think it's fair to say it hadn't been prioritised, so we had to give feedback and say, look, we really need leaflets to be given out because the art installation is our big thing this year, so it's really important. And their feedback was they weren't aware of how much of a priority it was, did I get that right?

R1: Yeah, I think that is right.

R2: Yeah, so they knew about it, but they didn't really know it was top priority. And if you want to get really technical about it, it's because our visitor reception's main job is to sell National Trust membership and provide a really good welcome to Gibside and there isn't a lot of time outside of that to talk about anything else. And what we had asked them to do was to do three things instead of two and that is alongside lots of other small things. You know, like selling raffle tickets and giving out wheelchairs and all the other stuff that they have to do.

I1: Did they think it was an imposition?

R1: I think they saw it as an additional to an already very busy job that was difficult to find the time for. I don't think... I don't know.

R2: A senior colleague said to me why is this art stuff so important? You know, I hit the roof. [Laughter].

I2: And I think that is really important, because what it illustrates is – and we have had this kind of conversation – interpolation is a core activity and no one in their right mind – who worked for any museum – would say what is it about this labelling business? But effectively that is what just said, isn't it? Why are we doing this? And this assumption that art is always the extra thing that you can kind of take it or leave it. It is...

I1: Why are we doing it in the heritage? It's historic, but why?

R2: Yeah, that is really good, because we ended up arguing – and I mean arguing – that actually this is what we are doing this year – this is how we are telling our story this year. We had done a lot of events in the past and we cut things out of the programme this year mainly to give [R1] the time to focus on this. So, yeah, we were saying this is how we are doing it this year, but I think that was what hadn't quite twigged, it was something extra. Not this year's number one priority that we were saying it was.

I1: Don't feel bad about that.

R2: No, I don't. [Laughter].

- I1: **This happens right the way the through the heritage putting contemporary art into historic places. I won't say always, but common is an organisational query about it is being done. It has always been the case that we are here to preserve and to tell history, what is the art? And I often think it's language, I think it's because it's called art that everybody goes, why have we got an artist in here? We are about this. And they don't see it's a continuation of what the property is about, you know, maybe the owners were connected and actually engaged with contemporary art and design. And it's actually continuing that, they don't see it as a wider viewing.**
- R2: This hasn't happened hugely, but I have heard comments along the lines of, why have we got art this year, [R2]? You know, all of the things that you have just said, nobody questions how much time and effort goes into guided tours. Or no one questions how much time goes into cutting the grass. And yet if we were oing this again, we would know all this stuff and we would really focus on it early in the project as to why we are doing it, as to why we are doing it. And it's not an extra, it's what we are doing this year, you know, it's like cutting the grass or putting up an interpretation panel. And that is what is quite difficult to articulate, and I think because we weren't up to speed, we weren't at that point where we are now. If we were to start this project again, we would do several things differently, wouldn't we?
- R1: We would, yeah.
- I2: **Yeah, that is really interesting.**
- I1: **That is really interesting and yeah, you shouldn't feel that that... I mean, yeah, confidential forum and all of that. And yeah, I went to Cragside to see the work and I was met by – I asked for information about some of the works – And I was actually met with, don't go and see that it's not worth it. And I realise that is not unusual I have heard that, I have heard it so many times and it's because there is a fundamental misunderstanding of why we are doing it. That is what it is, a fundamental misunderstanding of why, you know, the art is integrated into programming, it's not separate from – it's a continuous thing.**
- I2: **I guess just in terms of questions, I know we have talked a little bit about how visitors have used the leaflet. But, you know, what are your thoughts to how visitors have responded to the pieces themselves?**
- R1: It is very difficult to know, if I am honest, when the art first appeared on the landscape people would come in and they would leave comments – a mix of things. Some people were very enthusiastic, some people were very disparaging, but I think as time has gone on – since May when they first appeared – it's harder to know how visitors are reacting to it. There is some lovely, isolated incidents, we know people are engaging a lot on our social media and there is some fantastic photographs on Instagram and Twitter that people have shared of the art. Andrew's parrots have been really popular in social media terms, but, yeah, it's a challenge.
- R2: It is very difficult to know, we haven't really been worried about a bit negative response and we haven't had that at all. I would say it has been quite a neutral response, people have sort of said, "Hmm..." rather than... You know, they have been curious about it and wanted to know more, rather than they hated it and

complained about it. We have had one written complaint – I think – and a couple of grumpy verbal complaints. I think one volunteer questioned the historical accuracy of the Warden case which clearly, he has just not got it. But, yeah, I think I have been surprised by the neutrality of the response, if that makes sense? And for me neutral is good. [Laughter]. I think the fact we haven't had loads of complaints about it is really interesting and has certainly surprised me.

I1: Actually, that is interesting.

I2: Yeah.

I1: Because [Name] has had quite a lot of complaints, actually.

R2: Really? It could be that we have had lots of other problems this year and they have complained about those. [Laughter]. But, no it has been interesting. But, as [R1] said it's very difficult to actually measure. We talked about various things we are going to do to try and gauge feedback over the course of the year, but the project decided not to go down that route. So, we won't really know, I don't think, until we see a bit more of the research. But it has certainly encouraged us in terms of contemporary art, I think. I think that is a tool we could and should use now. As I say, it has changed my opinion about interpretation and it has certainly changed my opinion on how Gibside should be interpreted. Not just because of this project, but my thinking has shifted over the course of the year, because I have been at Gibside about a year now. So, I have been following my own thoughts and my initial thought was, cracking, there is not interpretation here at Gibside, so we need to tell the story in various ways. Now I am thinking, I don't know, does the Gibside story need to be told? Or, should we find more creative ways? You know, people are using it in a certain way, and that is okay. Just as an example, when I talk about guided tours, we used to have seven days a week volunteer guided tours. Now, we only have them three days a week and the numbers on the guided tours are really low. And I think it's connected to our health walk – we have got a health walking product – which is where they go with a volunteer on a short walk, more of a sociable wellbeing thing, it's not a history tour.

And the numbers on that are phenomenal and they are growing beyond what we can cope with. And it has made us think a lot this year about how do we... Obviously, people like going for a walk at Gibside and they love being sociable at Gibside, you know, they are thinking about the mental wellbeing a walk gives you. Because, those numbers are growing, whereas the people who want to go on a history tour and learn about the story, those numbers are dwindling. So, [R1] has got a task this year to think about how we harness that to improve this. But, actually – and this is probably what has shifted in my thinking – should we be trying to really push a guided tour – just as an example – to tell the story, when actually people were experiencing Gibside over here and having a great time in engaging with it in a different way. And we didn't need to worry about them going home not knowing about the story and the dates if they had experienced it and they feel fulfilled and a sense of wellbeing they wouldn't have had otherwise. So, yeah, that is what has shifted in my thinking, not necessarily just from this, but it has certainly been part of it.

I2: That is really interesting, and I think it's definitely a question... The key thing that struck me there was actually, what is the key thing you want people to feel when they go away. And in my days of being an education

officer in various historic properties I always said, “I don’t care if they remember the names, I don’t care if they remember dates, I care that they feel differently about something.” You know, that is what matters. And I think it’s really interesting that it seems that art has the possibility to do that in a whole range of ways. So, it’s isn’t about the learning something and to go away with a complete story, it’s about that snippet that you are hinting at.

I1: Can I ask a question actually which carries on from this. Which is the brief for this art was very specific for Gibside and it was that specific for other properties, actually. So, my question is, has Fiona’s and Andrew’s work been successful in telling the story about the Mary Eleanor Bowes?

R2: I am not sure it has, what do you think?

R1: I think as a whole, so when you bring in the interpretation and the artworks together, I would say yes, if a visitor chose to fully embrace the experience and read the accompanying interpretations and spend time thinking about it. Then yes, it has brought her story to life. In particular I think elements like Fiona’s blog and how she talked about how she got her ideas. I think if a visitor chose to view that - and the links are in the leaflet – that would really add to their experience and understanding of Mary Eleanor. In a passing way if you were there walking your dog and you walked past the urns and the Wardian case, then probably not.

R2: Yeah, I think if you actively chose to engage in it and look at the blog and read the leaflet, yes, it tells a story, But, passively – which is the majority – not so much. Which is not necessarily a terrible thing. But I was really struck by that Cragside thing and maybe I am just focussing on that, but to me that appealed on an emotion level and experiential level and our pieces don’t. Maybe that is because I have been looking at them for six-months. [Laughter]. But I think there are some examples of where you go away thinking differently about something. And I am not quite sure our pieces have achieved that.

I2: Okay. I am really fascinated by that kind of issue that sense that some things capture you emotionally and can stay with you and do in an almost unnameable way. And again, don’t worry about being critical in anyway, but is there anything about Andrew’s and Fiona’s work that you can say why they don’t have that for you, for some reason? There is something about them that...

R2: I think some of it is that scene setting, so, for example, we are very light on interpretation and I think if you were just dropped in front of Fiona’s sculpture, you are going to go, what is this? Whereas if you had a five-minute discussion with Fiona beforehand you would look at it in a totally different way and you would be thinking about the story of Mary Eleanor and why there is exotic plants in there and why they are bursting out of the top. Whereas I think without that – maybe what I am getting at is they are both a bit too – I can’t think of the appropriate word. I think what I am getting at is I am a bit too stupid for them. They are a bit too conceptual, just to compare it with the sunflowers thing – I got that – and I have been telling myself all year it’s not about do I get it. Because I think you told me off quite early in the process for...

I2: [Laughter].

R2: No, it was very informative. Because I remember saying something like, "I don't get this." Maybe it was at the interview process. And I think you said, don't worry about getting it, [R2], is it making you think about something? Which is the key thing. But I thought the sunflowers made me feel something. And our pieces didn't, maybe that is just because I am not really objective because I have been working on them.

I1: **Do you know, I find this really interesting from my point of view. Do you think that knowing the number of sunflowers that were planted and the number of women and making that connection between numbers of things you were seeing? And see that on a big scale like that and thinking. Do you think it was that? I have put that thought in your head now.**

R2: No, I think you are right there.

I1: **Because a similar thing happens with the poppies – you know the poppies thing?**

R2: Yeah.

I1: **Now you don't know actually whether there are 400 sunflowers there, really, do you? Because you are not going to count them, so actually that is a conceptual point, because there could be 200. But because it has got 400 people – 400 women. So, the interpretation is quite specific, but actually the work at what you are looking at is specific, because you could be looking at 250. But you are making a connection between that information and what you are seeing.**

R2: I think the sunflower piece is more direct, so I think it was easier for me to get my around it and to appreciate it. Whereas I have spent all year trying to explain the urns and Fiona's sculptures to visitors, friends and colleague. And I can't do it now really, I find it very difficult to say, right, what is that big black box with the flowers looking out of it? And I will still find it very difficult to articulate – you are much better than me at it. But, oh well, Mary Eleanor is a lady and she is really interested in botany and that is the Wardian case that we have been using to transport flowers in. I find it very difficult to articulate, maybe that is the problem?

I1: **That is so interesting because I find Fiona's piece so poignant that it's there by that Orangery – that was her place – and she wasn't allowed. And there is a piece that is beautifully positioned, which is about entrapment and forcing her to be – or women. I see it as a woman's story, so I find it quite a poignant piece of work. But, it's just so interesting.**

R2: I think I have lost objectivity there, I think through being so involved in it for so long. As I say, I was really impressed by a brand-new piece I saw the other day in my time off. But these pieces I have been looking at all year, and I suspect I have lost objectivity.

I1: **That is interesting.**

I2: **Yeah, but I think also which is why think the piece you saw at Craggside is really relevant and it's not necessarily whether you understand it or it's more direct. Because ironically - I could argue that - the sunflowers is a more complex piece because actually, what it does is it takes a very singular idea**

and then it makes you run with it and you think about it, and you think about it. And this is why I am very interested about interpretation, because potentially – and I have said this a little bit – if you have to spend too much time trying to work out what something means, you kind of lose the will. And it becomes like, oh, so that is the joke. You know, if you spend a lot of time understanding what a joke is, it's just never going to be funny when you finally understand it. Whereas with the sunflowers, it is about instantly getting it and then you can really resonate with the idea in all sorts of interesting directions.

R2: And spend time experiencing it. That articulates much better how I was feeling. [Laughter].

I2: **Yeah, which is why I am really fascinated about what you have said. Because at the Parsonage, the work that tends not to work are the ones that are a bit obscure, and you think, what is this? I don't understand that, but works that you can just see and get, but then have a richness. Those are the more complex ones I think, the complex in the sense of being powerful forms of interpretation. And that are not about knowing facts.**

I1: **But then it's the word interpretation, we could spend years looking at. That was really interesting, thank you.**

R2: [R1 might feel the opposite. [Laughter].

R1: I am just reflecting on how I felt when I first saw the pieces. I think for me there was one urn in particular of Andrew's and it was the urn that was positioned half way along the garden and it's black with red writing with the acer tree coming out of the top. And from a distance – I looked out of the window from the office – that one just really stuck me, there was something about it which was incredibly poignant. And perhaps - I don't know – I have a different feeling about it as a woman and relating to Mary Eleanor and her awful experiences. And it just really spoke to me, I think. it was interesting, I brought my parents to see the artworks and I my dad was obsessed with the fact that Andrew had chosen Paradise Lost as the words on the urns. And that had been something that I hadn't really thought about, but to me that was what really spoke to my dad. And he was like, that is really important and significant and really adds to it. And I just missed it, I completely missed that as something that added to the story. So, that was interesting reflecting on his interpretation and what he took away from it.

I2: **Yeah, that is really interesting. And I think that vase is quite powerful, the red and black works really quite powerfully.**

R1: It is very dramatic and contrasts so differently to the colours of the garden. The garden is a green space and then to have something that is black and red and fiery, just captures a different kind of emotion to what is normally a really tranquil space. It felt like an angry stamp – a protest.

I1: **Yeah, that is interesting.**

I2: **I think we are done.**

I1: **Yeah, we have said about the audience, yeah, I think we are done. Do you feel like we have...?**

R2: Yeah, I think so.

I1: **One thing, you said about the involvement of selecting the artists and that was energising, and you remember all of those things. [R2], do you remember saying one piece of work? I am going to ask you if you remember what it is?**

R2: Go on then.

I1: **You wanted one piece of work and you were really disappointed that you didn't get it.**

R2: It was [Name of Artist].

I1: **No, it wasn't, actually. It was another artist and you were saying I am going to commission that and I am going to try and find a way, do you remember?**

R1: It was the artist who wanted to wrap the Orangery in red ribbons, is that right?

I1: **That is right.**

R2: I can't remember, but I can picture it now.

I1: **You know, that is really interesting because I remembered – when you were saying that – [R2] really wanted that and said, you know, "I will find a way to do that." I remembered who the artist was, but I didn't remember what [they were] was doing, but you have just told me what it was. Now that is interesting because you remembered it.**

R1: I don't remember the artist.

I1: **It was [Name of Artist] and [they] wanted to wrap it in something, but I couldn't remember, which reveals something to me. I remembered the artist, but I didn't remember what it was. But that is interesting because you were really held on to it and said that...**

R2: I remember there was an element of [Name of Artist] that I really liked, I think it was the sound piece. But, yeah, I had totally forgotten about that, actually, but I can picture the concept now, yeah. We are thinking about what we can do in the Orangery in terms of art.

I1: **Has it encouraged you to do it more? Would you do it more?**

R2: Oh yeah, if there was a funding option to do something similar next year, we would be really interested I think, wouldn't we?

R1: Yeah.

I1: **That is good.**

R2: From a very practical programming point of view it has been a very productive use of our time, you know, to work on a project from a business point of view it gives

us a reason to visit for six-months as opposed to working really hard at a programme of events that only get so many people. So, yeah, fundamentally I think it has shifted our views on how we spend our time. So, yeah, we would like to be involved in more things like it. And I have started conversations with colleagues to kind of say, right, how do we progress this now? This has been a research project and we have really enjoyed being a part of it, but we have got half an eye now on what we can do in the future.

I1: Have you spoken to [NT1]?

R2: I have spoken to [NT1], [they] said I should speak to you. [Laughter].

I2: I think we have the opportunity for one more interview at some point in a while. So, I think it would be really interesting to have a conversation with you in six-months or a year's time to see where that has got to.

I1: Yeah, it would be good to have a conversation.

I2: Okay, thank you very much, I declare us finished.

[End of Recording].