

HP_EH_Belsay_Interview_29_Nov_2018

Date: transcribed date not recorded
Comments: This transcript contains background information as
an introduction to the interview.
Anonymised March 2021
Duration: Not noted

KEY:

I: = Interviewer

R: = Respondent

Background

[R] is property manager, English Heritage Belsay Hall and Gardens. Belsay was one of the sites where a MCAHE commission was located. The Yellow Wallpaper by Susan Philipsz sits outside of the main MCAHE research programme but is considered to be part of the overall project. Funding for The Yellow Wallpaper was provided by English Heritage, Arts Council England (through their National Lottery Project Grants) and the MCAHE budget.

Selection of the artist Susan Philipsz differed from the other commissions in that the artist had been approached before the MCAHE project had begun and her ideas developed throughout the duration of the main MCAHE project timeline. This meant that site staff were not involved in the selection of the artist from the outset.

The main contact for this MCAHE commission was [Full Name of Postholder] from English Heritage (Head Collections Curator), for technical and curatorial (historical) advice [Full Name of Postholder] (Senior Property Curator- North) and [Full Name of Postholder] (publications).

The Yellow Wallpaper- the work

The work, an audio installation, was a response to this empty neoclassical mansion, Belsay Hall, and its rather sombre atmosphere. Belsay prompted the artist to reflect upon the Charlotte Gillman Perkin's short story 'The Yellow Wallpaper' that follows a young woman's descent into psychosis as her hallucinations are strengthened by contemplating the fading yellow wallpaper within her bedroom. Inspiration for the work also came from the film 'Murders in the Rue Morgue'.

Susan Philipsz is a sound artist, based in Berlin whose work responds directly to histories, architectural narratives – site specific work that has a sound/sculptural element. The artist is well known; a former Turner Prize winner whose work appears in Biennales, Festivals, Museums, Galleries and in public spaces.

Interview: [I] talking to [R]

I: What does the phrase contemporary art mean to you?

R: 'I like seeing contemporary interventions within buildings, such as stained-glass windows in old churches - abstracted designs not literal representations. I particularly like contemporary design within buildings- clean lines of design such as modern staircases and furniture.

When I think of contemporary art I think of something different, not a literal representation of something. Something you don't immediately know what you are looking at. It evokes a reaction- a different feeling.

[I] and [R] discussed the terminology 'contemporary art'

I do wonder if that term might put people off - perhaps we could call it 'Today's Art'.

I like seeing sculptures in rural locations such as woods- I enjoy seeing something that is incongruous, unexpected within an environment. I enjoy event-based work, where you encounter actors within a site or a place where it is unusual.

I: What does the word 'heritage' mean to you?

R: That's a question! Perhaps heritage means the history of society – how people lived, or could be traditions like theatre production or a physical place like a castle.

Expectations of the work 'The Yellow Wallpaper'

R: My expectations of The Yellow Wallpaper changed when it arrived on site and was installed.

When we were first told that we were going to have the work here I was really excited as it was going to be something new. I remember saying to the workforce "this is going to be great, it's something new and different". I was told it was called 'The Yellow Wallpaper' and it was based on a book, so the staff and I did some research and found the short story by Charlotte Gillman Perkins. We became really concerned and worried about its content; we thought the work might involve screaming and be disturbing. I had to describe it to [Name of family member of Belsay Estate] and I glossed over content as I didn't really know what the work was going to be or sound like. I gave [them] the title of the work.

The staff were apprehensive as well as I couldn't describe what the work would sound like.

I then thought the work might be an audio work which included snippets of the book- so that you might hear a voice – like a narrator.

So when the work was installed (NB very near to the opening date) I was pleasantly surprised. It was melodic and quite spooky, actually. When it was first turned on in the cellars I found myself being rather scared and didn't want

to be down for any length of time. I did get used to it though and enjoyed the melodic sounds- I ended up humming it afterwards.

It was really difficult though for the staff as we didn't know what it was going to be or sound like and that allowed us to go down the route of thinking it was going to be something very different from what it actually was. My messages to them kept changing and that was confusing. I also felt that I must keep them engaged and enthused but without knowing what the work was I found that challenging.

The communication from [Name of Head Collections Curator], [Name of Postholder] ([Full Name of Postholder] technical advisor). [Name of Interviewer] and [Name of Senior Property Curator] was good but no-one really knew what the content was going to be- I was confident about the technical aspects but not the content.

I think the title for the work was problematic as it referenced the book but actually the finished work didn't really connect with the story.

Staff perceptions and expectations

R: I don't think the staff really understood what Belsay was trying to do- we are involved in so many new initiatives that it was difficult to understand what the 'plan' for Belsay really was for this commission. It feels as if there are too many ideas floating around and this was another one- so the staff were confused. We do have a lot of initiatives here and throughout the summer there was lots going on.

Visitor expectations and numbers

R: The work did not drive the numbers that we expected and I firmly believe that this was because there was a real lack of budget or awareness, we wondered if it had been built into a marketing plan or if they had been aware of the installation. There appeared to be no marketing budget attached and therefore it was up to us to do social media etc but we were preaching to the converted - all our social media is done by a member of staff who did her best but obviously we are sending to people that are interested in heritage. I think marketing should have been part of the plan.

Visitors arrived not knowing it was on, then were given a lot of information at the entry stage - staff were encouraging them to become a member, telling them about the site, facilities etc and also giving them the free publication at point of entry. It was all a bit confusing. There was also confusion about what to do when the tours were on.

Publication

R: We have about 6000 left over, I think there were too many printed? The workforce were also confused - should we be giving these away? How many should we be giving away? Again, the staff were confused and therefore the message was confusing for them - free publication, but guidebook costed out etc.

Tour Guides/Volunteers

R: I think the tour guides were confused as to what to do when they were trying to take people round telling them the history of the Hall. There were difficult practical operational issues (NB during the showing of The Yellow Wallpaper someone disconnected speakers and a couple were stolen).

Things that could be improved

R: I think if I could have equipped the staff with more information, they would have understood why the work was there and what it was.

There was no promotional literature on the site - no posters saying it was on, (maybe small posters in toilets etc) and no marketing. The marketing definitely needs to be part of any future plan.

The workforce was split on what the work was and if they liked it etc. I think we should have had more information so that I could have encouraged them more and they would have been more informed. Some staff and visitors really loved it and that something was there to bring the atmosphere alive. It is important to note that some visitors really liked the work.

I'm keen to have different experiences on this site and it lends itself to that. It's a blank canvas and I think we should have more work that elicits an emotive reaction. I wouldn't mind if it was controversial and it doesn't have to tell the story of the site. It could provide an ongoing focus for visitors - an expectation that we do something new.

If it attracts people to come here and solicits a response from them then that's great. I want them to discover the site in all its glory.'

ENDS

[I] November 2018