

**A&HP\_A&W\_Interview\_9 Oct\_ 2018**

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**Comments:** anonymised March 2021  
**Duration:** 00:35:55

**KEY:**

Cannot decipher = (unclear + time code)

Sounds like = [s.l + time code]

**I: = Interviewer**

**R: = Respondent**

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**I: I will just turn the recording devices on. Did you get time to look at the website? Do you know about our project?**

**R:** Yeah, I know a bit about it and I heard from [Name] at the National Trust about it. And also, I think Arts&Heritage are involved, aren't they?

**I: Yeah, Judith.**

**R:** So, broadly this is quite an interesting piece of work that is going on within Newcastle University. And I am really pleased just to start to the conversation and try contribute and give some thoughts to it.

**I: Brilliant, that is great.**

**R:** Did you get... There was quite a useful conference that we did together, you probably know about it down in Exeter in the summer.

**I: Yeah, that is right, I wasn't able to attend, but Andrew Newman - who is a member of our research team – was there and he gave a presentation.**

**R:** Yeah, he was great, actually.

**I: And I think he did a very short introduction to our project.**

**R:** Yeah, he did.

**I: And it would have been a good one and I know it was you, the Forestry Commission, the National Trust and a mix of things, it would have been good. But, I couldn't get to it unfortunately.**

**R:** Okay, no worries.

**I: Right. If you know a bit about the project that is great, so our focus is really looking at contemporary art and mainly, roughly the sort of visual art, sort of what we call visual art practice in heritage sites or heritage environments –**

**heritage properties. Throughout of the project we have done a number of commissions, but we are also doing – what were live this summer, but are coming to an end – which is what this interview is part, a sort of, large mapping exercise about what is the shape and trajectory of this field that we are call contemporary art and heritage? And where has it come from historically, and that kind of thing. So, this interview with you – I have done about ten other interviews so far with different curators and arts organisations who are involved in the field currently and historically – was really to ask you about the Arts on the Waterways project.**

R: Yeah.

I: **Before I start with my first question – I have just got very broad questions.**

R: Yeah, that is fine.

I: **But, since we are not here together, and I can't get you to sign an official consent form, can you just say that you are happy for me to record the interview?**

R: Yeah, absolutely no problem, are you on record?

I: **I am doing two audio recordings.**

R: Right, that is fine, yeah.

I: **So, the first question really is a broad one. Because obviously I know a little bit about your background and other stuff you have done. So, my first question is can you tell me about the history of your engagement in the contemporary art and heritage field? And at this stage I am presuming – making a presumption – that Arts of the Waterways fits this category. But, I know that you done – obviously you are an Arts Council?**

R: Yeah.

I: **Looking through your profile on LinkedIn it mentions some early work you did with the National Trust on a contemporary art strategy.**

R: Yes.

I: **So, a history of your engagement, just as an opener.**

R: Well, that is not a bad summary the LinkedIn profile, because it does describe the journey from having a really strong opportunity to see what is going on in the contemporary art in the 90s through to the mid to late noughties. So, I started at Arts Council England in the mid-90s when the Lottery was building up and saw the impact, is suppose, of that big investment. And saw the decline after the crash in 2007, when actually that was the year I left the Arts Council. But, it was a tremendous foundation I think and gateway to individual artists making the visual art and how they engage with the gallery context. But, also of course with the sites specific and public art. So, a lot of work I did was about public art development and supporting the national agencies which were promoting high calibre art in public (unclear 04:32) and conferences and publications. So, that

was a good introduction for me there and then I moved into the area of Arts & Ecology when I left there working with Michaela Crimmin at the RSA's Arts and Ecology programme.

**I: Oh, yeah, that is right.**

R: And that was quite a useful entry into environmental questions for artists. And, you know, that is quite a good programme and we worked on some residences there – I was a consultant there for two years.

**I: Okay.**

R: But, then after that I went freelance and I am an independent producer/curator working with associates. And every now and then something will happen, because it takes so long. And in the meantime I am working – and have been for the last six-years – with this charity organisation which was British Waterways but is now the Canal & River Trust.

**I: Yeah, yeah.**

R: As a charity it's one of the largest charities in the UK and I suppose you could say it has now become one of the largest wellbeing charities. Because that is its focus, its focus is now waterways and wellbeing, because the two are seen by the charity as integral to each other. Life is better by water and there is some quite useful research coming out about demonstrating that difference. So, the value of being near water or waterways. So, that is my history and how I arrived at the Canal & River Trust and in last years, I suppose, it has been a case of how to make the case for contemporary art within the heritage and environment organisation. And how to get money and create an atmosphere of that best practice, so that other parts of the organisation can pick it up and can start running it within their own region. So, we have now recently restructured so that we have a more important attachment to our regional colleges and regions.

**I: Okay.**

R: And a lot more work and delivery will be going on through those regions. So, it's really important the work we have done in the Arts & Waterways programme as a kind of exemplar for them.

**I: Yeah, so the Canal & Rivers Trust is England and Wales?**

R: Yeah, England and Wales.

**I: And do you work in terms of your area, are they similar to the Arts Council area?**

R: They are roughly the same, but they are not exactly. There are six of them, I think they are the North Midlands, West Midlands, East Midlands, London, South East and South West. And they have just recruited in the summer, directors for each of those regions. So, they are grappling with this extraordinary resource and I have been slowly meeting them to say this is what the arts can do. I have made an engagement with the Waterways and, you know, we are interested in each of

those directors picking up and understanding the value that art can bring to their heritage and waterways environments.

**I: So, how did that Art on the Waterways programme come about? How did it start?**

R: It started as a direct result – I think – well, it's quite serendipitous really, because I did some early work with Graham Devlin on that report you mentioned for the National Trust. And I did some quite deep digging, I suppose, into the National Trust's collection and its funds. And how we might be able to... And the recommendation -that report of course by the Arts Council England – was to set up a post in the National Trust and, you know, a number of recommendations about commissioning high-quality contemporary art as part of their properties. And how to fund that and how to build it into budgets and that kind of thing. So, that report started off at the National Trust, and on the back of that the Arts Council created its MOU with the National Trust first. And then three years – I think three or four years – behind now, I can't remember. But, the Forestry Commission was the third organisation, so really, we have followed on from that National Trust's first coming together and strategic agreement and MOU between the Arts Council. And that is where we are at, that is how the Arts and the Waterway started through that relationship and MOU with the Arts Council.

**I: Okay. Would it be possible for you to send us a copy of that MOU?**

R: Yes, of course, yeah, no problem.

**I: Okay, that would be great.**

R: You can get them from the National Trust as well, if you haven't already got one.

**I: We have got the National Trust ones, because obviously they are a partner in our project anyway. And I have already done a similar interview with [Name] and also with [Name] from Trust New Art, so we have got that. But, it will interesting to see the Canal & River Trust one.**

R: Yes.

**I: And if that is a three/four year...**

R: Yeah, four years.

**I: So, you on the first phase of that, or second?**

R: We are in our second term – our second MOU.

**I: Okay.**

R: 2016 to 2019. So, this week we have a meeting with [Name] to explore the big pictures, what the big principles should be going forward in terms of a new MOU between the two of us.

**I: Yeah, okay. So, we have the Graham Devlin report?**

R: That is very old that.

I: **I know, I have got a copy of it. It is really interesting though, actually, it has got stuff about the Foundation for Arts which I didn't know about, so that was a really interesting read. So, yeah, it has been influential on these MOUs?**

R: Yeah, I think so, yeah.

I: **So, has much changed between your first MOU and what you are thinking about now?**

R: I think art is changing more quickly now, because the first MOU was very much about doing some pilot projects. There were six pilot projects which were agreed in the MOU and we did things like the Canal Laureate – a poem - by Joe Bell who was fantastic, actually. And we also... You will have to look at our fine art website because there is past projects thing. And the past project is quite a useful, if you look at our page you will see there are PDFs of our annual leaflets which effectively summarise everything.

I: **Yeah, yeah.**

R: It shows the list of projects and what waterways they happened on. And it features four or five projects.

I: **Okay.**

R: And it's worth having a look at that, they are really good. You can print them out and they are just very useful summaries of the way we commissioned and who we commissioned and where we commissioned. And the changes that have happened since 2012 and my role which was only initially for 18 months. So, how do you make the case within 18 months of living artists and contemporary culture being part of a past-focused charity or organisation? Because that was quite an important thing to bring a case for a permanent role, which we did. And the challenge has always been how do you demonstrate the range of different values that engaging with the arts brings? So, a lot of people still have the old corporatism mentality that it can only be method in terms of accounts and return on financial investment. Which we have demonstrated, we have done that. But, we now have to continue the challenge and I think it's working. But, the arts are all about mental wellbeing and experience and challenging people's perceptions and we want to do that in a range of ways. Some are more harmonious with the sites, some are quite provocative, but in a constructive way. So, what we are now having to do is really tie up our programme very much to the charity's new priorities around wellbeing and community engagement and in very particular locations. And it means reaching the right locations where engagement and appreciation of waterways and the arts is really low. So, that is what has changed, you know, we are actually embedding the arts programme more into the strategic thinking and priorities of the organisation.

I: **Okay. So, to take you back to the beginning – my introduction – and absolutely our interest in the visual arts and heritage. Obviously, you mentioned wellbeing and the environmental interests. But, some of this when you talk about the Canal & River Trust, we are talking about canals as**

**built heritage, at least certain parts of the UK. I don't know if you can expand a bit on this heritage element, the building element?**

R: Yeah, I mean it's a good question. It is a heritage organisation, because these are two hundred plus year old structures that we are talking about. And we have quite an extensive team of heritage network managers who specialise in advice and to ensure guidelines are there for both the users of the waterways and also our own team. To make sure there is respect and protection of these heritage structures. So, a lot of our work is...

I: **Oh, I have lost your video, but carry on.**

R: Hang on, I have just got an incoming call – I have declined it. Yeah, a lot of our work deliberately and obviously can't ignore these spaces which pass through extraordinary parts of towns, cities and rural areas. I mean these are places normally a lot of people don't normally go because the canals were stopped being used as a commercial route a very long time ago. Very few people actually get on boats and often the towpaths in the inner cities areas are really no-go areas. But, they are also heritage run, so the interesting challenge for us is how the arts and the Arts on the Waterways can bring these heritage places back to life. And how to enhance people's experience of them, so it might be, for example, there is a lot of anti-social graffiti or littering in particular areas of a heritage structure that has just been badly underinvested in. But it still has its important structures, and slowly but surely a lot of those heritage places are being transformed by what the charity is doing.

I: **Yeah, yeah.**

R: So, I think it's about how the arts – the living artists – and the contemporary culture can bring heritage to life to local people.

I: **Yeah, and I am thinking, obviously the North East of England is one of those areas of the country that doesn't really have any canals.**

R: No, Stockton is your nearest, I think.

I: **Yeah, that is right. So, we talk about, you know, as you said towpaths, canal sides, tunnels, bridges, that sort of thing. The kind of warehouse and those sort of structures that are alongside. And obviously the contemporary, urban and rural areas.**

R: Yeah, we are not talking about the traditional notion of heritage.

I: **No.**

R: Also, the waterways are navigations or navigable rivers, they are not just built structures. So, you know, even the River Severn, the River Ouse and The Tees.

I: **Yeah.**

R: These are all places which have been dredged to make them navigable over many centuries. So, we still manage some of those rivers – quite few rivers – but only where they are navigable. And I like that notion of thinking of a river of a place of

heritage, you know, a place of extraordinary historic importance. But, it's still very contemporary in terms of what it offers.

**I: I am just thinking in terms of the sites we have worked with in our project in terms of our own commissioning have been National Trust properties, you know, Belsay and a church building. But, when we are talking about Canals and the Waterways, we are talking about a totally different structure of heritage visiting, if you like, and usage. You know, we are not talking about visitors going to Belsay, so that is quite interesting as well. And it made me think about – you say something about you audience?**

**R:** Yeah, so, it is kind of quite recent that we are doing about our audience expectations and who it's that goes and who we want to target. And we do quite an extensive visitor survey that shows where people are coming from. But, you will have to read something called Waterways & Wellbeing, it's just an executive summary, but it has got in all the actual facts about our audience base and our demographics.

**I: Okay.**

**R:** And there is something like eight million people live within five kilometres of a waterway, so it's a big chunk of the population. And we very much want to target deprivation, now, because a lot of waterways are pretty much well looked after. But, the only way we can do that is inspiring these communities through the arts and adopt and look after them through their own time. So, one theory is getting communities is to adopt a stretch of water - which is quite a novel idea – and to look after it. And particularly in areas where it's a challenging social mix, you know, we are looking at how to do that now with different agencies. You know, these young people who have nothing much to do, so they are kind of doing their graffiti – their tagging. So, we are trying to think about how we can work with them in very different ways to inspire them. And to also carry on doing their tagging, but in legitimate areas and for them to help look after other parts of their stretch. And then there is a big question around women on the waterways, so with extraordinary projects like Idle Women up in the Leeds and Liverpool Canal. And they have done a brilliant job, and it's well worth looking up on their site how they are an extremely important exemplar of how contemporary arts initiatives is bringing people to a heritage site.

**I: Yeah, okay.**

**R:** Even though that site is a long stretch, but now what they have done is purchase a beautiful heritage physic garden – a medical garden. They bought it from the local authority in – oh Christ – near Accrington, it will come to me.

**I: Okay, yeah. Are there any others? Obviously, I have had a little look at some other things that I picked up from your current projects. There was The Hinterlands programme on a remote stretch of water which fits in to what you have been saying. There is The Super Slow Way Project and The Ring.**

**R:** Yeah.

**I: And this sort of mix of projects which... You mentioned social engagement arts practice quite strongly.**

R: Yeah.

I: **But, you also mention artist residencies and you also mentioned – which is not really in our category of thinking – commissions, more permanent things which I would put more in the art category rather than the contemporary commissioning and heritage type category. So, are there any – you mentioned Idle Women – other sorts of exemplar or particular projects which...?**

R: I think you should look at within Super Slow Way – this is where it always becomes quite interesting – because I blur the lines between permanent and temporary.

I: **Okay.**

R: You know, I tend to much more fluid about what we mean about public art. So, whilst we might do something that with Anthony Gormley in partnership with The Landmark Trust, for example, in 2014 where there was a permanent (unclear 22:48) and it sat there for a year and it got an amazing reaction. You know, we are doing things in the Super Slow Way Project, for example, there were two projects that I could mention that are worth looking at where there is a permanent piece of sculpture involved. One is a permanent object and one is consensual object, so Stephen Turner produces this wonderful egg, which is a studio, so it's like a kind of, peripatetic studio beautifully designed. It is a craft object, ultimately, but it's a space in which there is a hatch. And you get into the hatch and that is where he worked and be sculpting in and out of that. But, bringing lots of different people from the community and maybe make interventions around this egg, so have a look at that project and Stephen Turner's Egg in Leeds and Liverpool Canal.

I: **Okay.**

R: And then the other project that they did was by an artist called Suzanne Lacy who is a leading American artist who specialises in work being made as a result of participation of river collaborations within specific communities. She did something called Shapes of Water, Sounds of Hope, that was the title. And that such an important exemplar, okay, you got good money from Arts Council England for Super Slow Way and it has enabled these projects. But, they are shifting mindsets and perceptions and attitudes, those two particular projects. And they are about, they made shapes, literally a sort of shaped sound, so it wasn't a conventional public art structure or sculpture. But, in my view it's equally as important to have much resonance inside the memories and experiences of people as an object. So, I think that is generally where I am always coming from. And because we are talking about a general material – water – something that is fluid, it goes with the way we commission our communising strategies which is engagement, duration and temporality. And something to do with deep social engagement, and I think in a way that all happens in that British context. And I know you created your criteria, but I think it would be good to see that viewpoint acknowledged in your report.

I: **Yeah, yeah.**



R: So, you know, there is one other project which – just quickly, we either fund raise on a lead project or we co-commission.

I: **I was going to ask you about that, yeah.**

R: Or we facilitate amazing ideas that come to us that we haven't thought of. So, there is something in London called The Line which is about sculptures which are hidden in the collections or the store warehouses of major dealer galleries or institutions. They can't be constantly on show, but there is a great initiative - which we didn't initiate, but we supported, and is still ongoing – called The Line. And it's by a big-named artists, like, Richard Wilson, Damien Hurst and Abigail Fallis is quite a big one. Their sculptures were brought out of these gallery storerooms and put onto a line along the Lee Navigation. So, it joins the Queen Elizabeth for the Olympic Park with Greenwich Peninsula. So, that very much I think about giving access to these past sculptures which are often quite, you know they are from the 70s through to the 90s, they are heritage pieces themselves, but they are in a heritage location. The river Lee Navigation is a very historical route through London – historically – and is seen as a heritage site.

I: **So, the MOU arrangement – just to clarify – is like the National Trust in that they have to make regional applications to Arts Council England through grants to fund the actual programme?**

R: Yeah, we don't get a grant, we have to apply and we applying in the context of the MOU and they are not legally... They can't preference it, but it's done knowing that we have an understanding and some we win and some we lose. But, you know, it helps having this MOU because we can also draw on their advice and we have regular meetings with them. So, it's useful for us that MOU.

I: **Okay, I know you only have half an hour, so I will go to my final question which is another open one.**

R: Yes.

I: **What do you see as the key opportunities, issues and challenges for contemporary art and heritage as a field of practice? So, maybe a bit of maybe what you are doing, but beyond. It is a big one.**

R: It is a big one, I mean, it came up at the conference actually and main challenge is how to maintain innovation and provocation and experimentation, and that is a big challenge for us. Because to a large extent I think heritage organisations are still quite conservative with a small c. I still think the learning – the pace of learning – from the National Trust has slowed down and is probably not fast enough. That is not necessarily criticism, but I think in this country in particular you can do so many amazing projects and models. And I know Arts&Heritage have done this, but it doesn't always follow.

I: **So, yeah, I know that was a big question to launch on you, but you have given a couple of good answers so far.**

R: Yeah, I think that is an important point, I think it goes to the governance of these organisations and their own visions and missions. There is always some kind of weird detachment between heritage and contemporary cultures at the top end of these organisations. And I think there needs to be much more acceptance of a

fluidity between what we call the past arts, heritage and the contemporary. And I think people keep to these almost contrived timelines and I think there is a bit more interesting dialogue and critical debate to be had about what we mean by these terms, contemporary and heritage.

**I: Absolutely.**

**R:** So, you know, I think that is a content challenge, but also an amazing opportunity to encourage a cultural debate between the past and the present. Those people who are guardians of the past arts and heritage and those that are curators of the contemporary need to come together much more often in a regular way. And then, you know, I hesitate to say about resources, because I think you can do an awful lot with people's time if you make the right arguments and you get them in front of an amazing artist. It doesn't always come down to huge amounts of funding to make these changes. It is just having the courage to take quite big risks, both from my prospective in my role and also, I expect and would hope to inspire risk at the trustees level. But, that is easier said than done.

**I: So, you have a post with the Canal & Rivers Trust? It is not external?**

**R:** No.

**I: And where does that sit? Do you have a team of people? How does that work?**

**R:** Well, it has moved around a bit, so we were originally in an education team. And then it's has moved to the communications team which is quite interesting in really understanding the direct role. Now, because there has been a big restructure, it has ended up at what is called the strategy impact and engagement directorate.

**I: All right, yeah, yeah.**

**R:** So, they are looking at big questions based on surveys and our research into what people's perceptions of the waterways are. A lot of our work will be particularly, for example, around these areas where it feels unsafe or not very accessible – the waterway itself. So, it will be a big, kind of, flooding of those area -if you excuse the pun – of the various teams to make those physical problems accessible.

**I: We can probably just wrap this up, actually, obviously I have taken up more than your half an hour. So, if there is anything else I might come back to you. But, just to highlight next year we are doing – our commissions are finished – a conference - which we're about to start promoting in that the next weeks – on the 29<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> July next year at Newcastle. So, we are looking for contributions – and people to come to it – of cooperate papers or cooperate presentations. So, we will be sending that out quite soon and I will send that to you directly, so hopefully we can continue this conversation. Because, part of the whole purpose of the research is to try and look at this whole... I know Arts&Heritage are a partner and Judith King is a senior researcher on the project as well. So, we are not overlapping with what they are doing as the sector support organisation, but we are kind of augmenting that in terms of our research. And thinking again about – what you said – conversations that need to happen between people working with contemporary arts and people working with heritage. And that is what we are hoping to do in the conference, bring both those sectors together,**

**which is quite a challenge. But, we are going to try and do that anyway, so I can tell you more about that later on.**

R: Great, well done, it all sounds really exciting. Are you doing an interim report at some point?

I: **Well, we are a three-year project and we are actually just over half way through. So, it won't be an interim report, but we have started doing some writing from the project and there will be some publications – articles and things like that. At the end of the project there will be a report, but we haven't completely ironed out whether that is just for the partners that we are working with. Which are English Heritage, Churches Conservation Trust and National Trust, or whether that goes more broadly to other partners. But, that is partly the purpose of the conference, to send out what we are doing and find out what other people are doing. And what people need as well, in terms of possible future networks or opportunities.**

R: Right, if you need any more information just send an email or ring me. And we can meet up with one of our artists if you want to do an interview with them. Keep an eye on the website as well.

I: **Absolutely, we will do, yeah. Thanks very much, [R].**

R: Speak soon, cheers, bye.

I: **Bye.**

**[End of Recording].**