

A&HP_IC_Interview_17_Oct_2018

Date: transcribed 08/11/2018
Comments: anonymised March 2021
Duration: 00:47:18

KEY:

Cannot decipher = (unclear + time code)

Sounds like = [s.l + time code]

I: = Interviewer

R: = Respondent

NT1, NT2, NT3, NT4 = National Trust Staff

O1, O2, O3 = Other Persons

I: I am just going to ask you, [R], how much do you know about our project already? And do you want a bit of a recap?

R: I will tell you what I know, it's based at the University of Newcastle. And it has been a great partnership for Trust New Art and National Trust and it has resulted in several projects with some fantastic artists.

I: Shall I give you a bit of an overview – a formal overview – and then I will ask you for your consent for what I am about to do?

R: Yeah.

I: So, you already know about one aspect of the project, yeah, it's a three-year project based at Newcastle as you know. And also, in collaboration with the University of Leeds. It is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. And we are just over halfway through our project. So, we end in December 2019. So, the project has had three strands, the main one which we have been really occupied on and taken up a lot of our energy so far is the one that you have referred to which is a series of commissions we have done with the National Trust, Churches Conservation Trust and English Heritage sites in the North East. Obviously working with [NT1] and people from the National Trust pretty closely in that. So, that has been the major strand. And we are sort of following those projects as case studies, so looking how the artists have approached that work and how it effects the future practice. And how sites and organisations have engaged with that. And also looking at how audiences have engaged with that, so we have been doing some research with focus groups and taking them around these different commissions and talking to them about their experiences of them.

R: Great.

I: And also, a little bit of on-site visitor research, but is a slightly different thing. And then the third part of the project which is where this interview comes in, is we are calling it a, kind of, mapping. So, it's a mapping of this field of what we are calling contemporary art and heritage practice. And we are looking at who is involved currently and what is the scope of projects. But, also looking back historically at the trajectory of that, where has that come from and how has it developed? And possibly asking some questions about where that practice might be going. So, this interview is part of that, so I have done a series of interviews with various – about 12 interviews – independent curators and people working in the National Trust and other organisations. So, what we are doing with this material is it all forms part – as a research project – of our data. So, this series of interviews will be transcribed, and we may use text from the interviews in later publications or presentations. So, I have to ask, because normally I would have a consent form for you to sign, so I am just asking via audio whether you are happy for us to use this interview in that way?

R: Yes. I suppose, as long as nothing in the conversation will turn into text.

I: Yeah, sure.

R: I suppose that just means if I want to say something very frank and honest, then bare that in mind it might find its way into print. So, if I want to say something off the record then I will it as off the record, if that is okay?

I: That is fine, I think what we have said to some people is if we are going to quote people at length in any way, that we might get back to people and just check that out.

R: Yeah, that sounds good.

I: No, that is fine, if you want to share something in privacy that is useful for our research, but you won't be quoted. That is brilliant. So, is that enough for you to know about our project to proceed? I mean, I have got an agenda that I am using for these interviews, but it's not a strict thing, they are quite open questions. So, it's just to guide our interview, really. So, if you are happy to begin, my first question is to ask you to tell me about your history of engagement in what I am calling this contemporary art and heritage field. And including the partnerships you have developed or who you have worked with in the heritage museum sector. And obviously I do know a little bit about your background, but you can tell me about it in your own words.

R: Yeah, it grew out of working in the museum sector. I was working at Nottingham Castle and I started in a very clunky way introducing artists to collections. I think one of the inspirational projects was Claire Twomey in a British museum.

I: Yes.

R: But, I had never been interested in working in a museum until I went there and then I realised what an incredible resource that the collections could be for art.

I: Was that a formal role that you have at Nottingham?

R: Yeah, I was exhibitions curator there for 14 years – part-time – and it was really valuable in terms of understanding collections and heritage and the conservation and all that side of it. And I had enough freedom to develop my own projects as well as what the local authority was keen to see. And then I went freelance and my first job was with 78 Derngate, it's the only Rennie Mackintosh house in England – Northampton. And it was funding an Arts Council and they wanted to put an extension on to increase the space for visitors, because it was a tiny town house. And it was through Arts Council, I went to talk to them and they said we would like to start a contemporary art programme here. So, while working with them we did that, and it was a commission and it was a permanent commission and it wasn't necessarily looking at what the Trust calls is the Spirit of the Place, which you have probably heard me talking about. [I] I have just noticed my Mac is on 5%, so I am just going to get my cable.

I: **Okay, that is fine.**

R: The exhibition programme focussed on craft and design and the commission was by Laura Baxter. And that was over about a year and was a really good introduction into thinking about historical sites. And for the first time thinking about heritage audiences of contemporary art. And I think my museum background made me really think – we had a really strong engagement education and outreach team. And it has meant I have always thought about how the audience is going to perceive something. And I see my role as a bridge between contemporary art and the audience, so that was really useful thinking about people come here to see Rennie Mackintosh and then they are going to see this contemporary art. And how do we bridge that gap? That is if there is a gap. And then I applied for Crafts Council for a bursary called [s.I spark plug 10:42] to work with Chatsworth.

I: **Okay, yeah.**

R: Which is about an hour and a half away from me. And I wrote to them – they were already doing the [s.I Summerbies 10:42] sculpture show, but not much more. And I said are you interested in working with artists? And they said yes, come and talk. And then I got the bursary and that was the most fantastic opportunity to delve into every aspect of Chatsworth's collections, except the attics. [Laughter].

I: **When was that, [R]?**

R: That was before they had a huge attic sale - which got into the press – in 2009.

I: **Okay.**

R: And I put forward a proposal and a long list of artists. And I raised 35 grand from the Arts Council and then they said, thank you, that is great, but we don't want to go ahead with the project. They were very honourable, they paid me for all the work I did on top of the bursary time. And the reason they gave – and I think it was genuine – was that there were other things that they wanted to do. And I think what threw them was it was the first time they had ever had any public funding and they got the condition letter – the normal condition letter. But, I think it was that realisation that if we take this money we have to fulfil that role of spending public money for the arts. And they realised that they didn't need it.

I: **[Laughter].**

R: And that is the truth. And they then did the attic sale and I think that was all connected. And, you know, they raised millions. And they have gone onto to do some fantastic projects and I have remained in touch with them. And they have a really great team there. And it gave me the passport then to get into the National Trust and in my region, I went to a very early Arts Council - National Trust – arts organisation meeting. And I remember the director of an arts organisation in Derby saying, “I don’t know what I am doing here.” And I always remember that. And I remember the two keys leaders – the drivers of contemporary art in my region, the East Midlands – were [Name] and [Name] at Arts Council and [Name] at Arts Council. And they then piloted with someone who is now a colleague of mine – freelance colleague – [O1] and [O2] who were called Whitelight – I think. And they piloted a project in Lincolnshire at Tattershall Castle called the House of Bling.

I: **Yeah, okay.**

R: And that was a first Trust project in the East Midlands.

I: **And what date was that, do you know?**

R: I think that was around 2009 or 10, but I can find out if you like.

I: **We have been gathering a database of things.**

R: Brilliant, I can find out for you.

I: **Okay. We can follow that up later.**

R: And that was, you know, the old style, it was parachuted in. It was very clearly Arts Council and the Trust wanting to get on and show what could be done. There were some really fantastic artists in the show and a great mixture of live art and video installation. And an amazing piece by Linda Florence where with a team of volunteers she cut out a pattern in the grass, so you could see that from the top. There was going to be a wildflower garden on top of the tower, but that had to be abandoned for conservational and constructional reasons.

I: **Were these all site-specific commissioned work? Or was it a mix?**

R: They were all site-specific commissioned works and they were thinking about spirit of place in both a material way, looking at fragments from the collections, because there was hardly any collections there. Or looking at lonely male figures based on Cromwell who lived there – not thee Cromwell, another one. So, there was definitely discussion – and I can find out more about this from [O1]– around the place and what it was saying to those artists.

I: **Is [O1] the curator?**

R: [They] and [O2] jointly curated that.

I: **Okay.**

R: And there was a fantastic schools project with that as well which had its own legacy and documentation. It had really good numbers, but it didn't have a very good reception at Tattershall, it was very early days and there was an unreceptive general manager and it had been landed on [them]. So, I can see it from both points of view. And it was really interesting when [O1] and I were employed two-years later we went back to Tattershall and it was hard work, again. So, that was very interesting to learn, really.

I: **So, your current role as a freelance curator, but you are working as an advisor with Trust New Art in your area. Is that right?**

R: Yes. And just one more role before that.

I: **Okay, yeah, go on.**

R: So, after that House of Bling, the Trust and Arts Council decided to create a post for two-years. That was called contemporary art development for the East Midlands, but again it was under the old structure of National Trust. So, it was top-down, you will work with Tattershall, but it could be in Lincolnshire because it's an area of low engagement. You will work in Kedleston in Derby and you will work Clumber in the Nottinghamshire.

I: **Yeah, okay.**

R: And I don't know how much say those properties had in saying yes. So, we did a programme called Playful Landscapes for two-years and we said we were freelance- it was [O1] and I – can we keep our freelance status? And they said, no, we really want you to be employed, but they made it very easy for us to do that, so that was great. So, we could take on a lot of work and we didn't have to look at all the cooperate stuff. So, we did four projects over those three years and we raised a 100 grand, we worked with Cultural Olympiad. And I think we set a, sort of, energy going in the East as Meadow Arts were doing in the West. Then at the end of that contract I said, "I have just got a handle on Trusts and I am really keen to carry on working with you." And I was contacted by [NT2] in the West who is a historic curator who is fantastic and also very enthusiastic. And [they] said we want to do something with this stuff in the West, we don't want to work with Meadow Arts in the same way. We want to work in a different way under the new structure of the Trust more as a consultant. So, that has been that role until 2013.

I: **Okay.**

R: And yesterday we had a review meeting of the last five years and the way ahead, so that was very much in my mind, thinking back to 2013.

I: **Okay, yeah. So, is that an ongoing contract? How does that work?**

R: It works year on year, well, in two ways. It works when we put in the bid to the Arts Council and we have just been successful with our second bid and there is some money in that for me to support those properties to deliver those projects. And then [NT2] also identifies funding from the regional office for me to be Trust New Arts support and advisor. Which probably adds up to a day a week. And sometimes properties contract me one to one individually to deliver as well. And then I do other work as well. And I have just got a role with [O1] with a national public programme which you might...?

- I: **Yeah, I have got a meeting actually with [NT4] next week about that.**
- R: Oh, yeah, great.
- I: **And I was at that Pride and Prejudice place conference, where was that? Burton?**
- R: Oh, yes.
- I: **Did you go to that?**
- R: No, I didn't get to that one.
- I: **Okay.**
- R: I went to the Museum is Not Neutral and saw some of the information from that.
- I: **Okay. Was is that? That sounds great, brilliant.**
- R: It is brilliant. [Laughter]. I have got a wonderful job.
- I: **So, are you working across – you mentioned East Midlands and West Midlands. So, are you now, kind of, the whole Midlands? Or who does it work?**
- R: The whole Midlands, yeah. They are just about to appoint a new cultural programming role and the idea is that we will work together, and they will be more hands-on.
- I: **Okay.**
- R: And they have got designated properties. So, that will mean [NT2] stepping back, she literally can't do Trust New Art as part of her other role.
- I: **Sorry, what is [NT2's] role?**
- R: [They are] the Trust New Art employed representative.
- I: **Okay.**
- R: So,[they] advocate[] it and lobbies for it internally. And I keep in touch because I go to the meetings and I do all the stuff. But, [they are] the one who is that internal advocate.
- I: **Okay, great. I am just reviewing my questions here. You said some interesting things earlier on, so I am kind of thinking about motivation and interests in working in this area of contemporary art practice. And I think you said earlier something about seeing your role as being a bridge between audiences and contemporary art. Particularly as you said, you know – in your earlier role – people expect coming to a Rennie Mackintosh house are expecting a heritage experience and then they encounter contemporary art of some kind. I don't know whether you could say a bit more – if there is**

anything more you could say about that bridge role? Or the motivations for you.

R: That bridge role for me crosses over between interpretation, marketing, the artists and the artwork – and the integrity of the artwork. So, it's about preparing the visitor before they even arrive that something different is on if it's a first-time property. Once it has happened the first time the audience is then used to change and it's easier. But, the first time it's about the property saying we are proud that we are doing this project. And I am supporting them to create that bridge to prepare the visitor for an interesting experience. And it's not one that they might like and that is fine. And it's the same bridge we are creating with the volunteers as well who have to travel with us and be professional and help the audience if needs be. So, it's doing that while keeping the integrity of the artwork and the artwork doesn't become subsumed within the Trust and it holds it own. And it's questioning, it's in the right place physically, but also within the programme – how does it sit? So, one of the questions I always ask at the first meeting is, on a scale of one to ten how important is this project next year, or the year after? And that gives me a really good idea, because I obviously think it's going to be the most important thing of the year. But, it isn't always.

So, it's not anymore second, third or fourth, it's always going to be top now, that has really changed. But, it's really important to know what else is on and what the pressures are on that team. So, it's about telling the visitor even before they have arrived on the website and when they come into the carpark. And as they come in and buy their tickets where there is obviously lots of information, but how can you tell them it is on? At the point which they are seeing the artwork, how are they being helped to understand the artwork without compromising the artwork itself? Is there someone there to talk to about it? Is there a feedback mechanism? And are the volunteers confident in talking about it? So, it's fine if there is discussion and it's fine if people don't get it or like it. But, as long as they understand why the Trust is doing it. And in the last five-years it feels as though a lot of that has been achieved and there are still visitors who don't particularly like it, but they understand why the Trust are doing it. They understand the reasons, they understand that artists support the interpretation and they can come up with new ways of seeing. I think they understand that the funding is from the Arts Council rather than just internal. And I think they understand that these places – properties – were created by contemporary artists of their time. And the Trust is continuing that legacy, and those are all the messages we try to get across and I see as my role to do that. And supporting the lead to create a team around them and to get senior management's support. And I also do some advocacy in the region and externally as well. And another part of my role is leading a group – anyone in the region – who wants to come. And we go on trips and do learning sessions, we do brief writing and all that sort of stuff as well.

I: **Yeah. It is interesting about what you are saying about visitor understanding of these projects is increasing. I am wondering whether there is anything in that – maybe it's hard to say – the differences between who is who. But, those visitors who are just coming to Tattershall as a one-off and those people who are National Trust members? Because obviously it's a membership organisation as well as running visitor attractions, in a sense. So, I am wondering whether there is anything there about the members of the National Trust? One of the things that was said in one of the other interviews I have done with – I think – [NT3] from the National Trust. [They] said that the National Trust now sees itself as an organisation that**

commissions contemporary art. Which is quite a big thing for a heritage organisation to say, and I wonder whether in your experience with visitors and visitor understanding. Whether there is an understanding among the National Trust members that they are belonging to an organisation that commissions contemporary art?

R: I think the members are probably more informed than anyone else, because the National Trust is so good at marketing itself to members. And where they find it really hard – understandably – is attracting non-members, new audiences and contemporary art audiences. So, the membership gets lots of stuff, they get the main magazine, they get the regional season thing four times a year. They get more, so even if they are visiting Northumberland from the Midlands, they will be seeing what is happening in the Midlands in terms of contemporary art. So, I think the membership are probably more informed. The other thing is the National Trust do loads of work on segmentation and they are very aware when I go in and talk about projects and we talk about who the audience is. And who do we want to reach at what time of year, and they are very savvy on reaching that membership or wanting to retain their traditional curious minds, let's say. The more traditional visitor who they know exactly when they come, if they have been looking after their grandchildren in the summer and they start to go out again in the autumn. Just as a contemporary art audience, things like autumn – students. So, they really know who their membership is. And I think that the membership – although some of them really don't like contemporary art – know that it's happening.

I: **Yeah. And what about – you mentioned the contemporary art audience. Do they know this is happening? What is your experience with that kind of group? Does the contemporary art audience who might go to, I don't know, Ikon in Birmingham or something? How much do they know about that they could go and see contemporary art at National Trust properties?**

R: Well, the evidence I have is not necessarily from property evaluation. We have been very weak in that area, we have had an independent evaluation done recently on the last programme. And our audience stats are okay, but the quantitative stuff is really poor. But, our evidence is from two meetings – one in 2014 and one in May this year – where we invited arts partners from the region to join us, it was like a networking session to find out what the Trust was about. And the first one was in Birmingham and hardly anyone came, just the faithful contacts came and one of them was crafts-based, [O3]. So, my contacts, really. And [they] had already worked with the Trust and we started working with New Art West Midlands – a contemporary visual arts network. We were working with Locus+ after a visit to Newcastle, and we worked with Arts Alive, but it was very much just chance or serendipity, it wasn't through people phoning us up and saying we want to work with you. And I think they perhaps didn't know how.

But, in May this year we did a similar session and we invited MPOs that were pre-selected that I had shortlisted from the MPO list in the region. Down to visual arts, sort of, engagement-led organisations, artist-led organisations, all the big arts organisations and a couple of museums. And I wrote to them all and we got 25 replies which I thought was amazing. [Laughter]. And we got 23 attendees. And the other said at the last minute we can't make it, but we are really interested in working with you. And it was like speed dating, so everyone presented at the exact same time – we had tables – and then we moved around the tables to talk to each other. And it was brilliant, it was really exciting and interesting atmosphere and there was a great feeling of people wanting to work with the Trust and vice

versa. And [O3] said you have come along way; the staff are talking with more confidence about their work and with more enthusiasm. They are standing up at the front of the room in front of 25 arts people and they are holding their own. And it was just great to hear that reflected and from that some partnerships have formed.

I: Yeah, okay.

R: So, I think that is not answering your question directly, but all those people are arts people, aren't they? And they are seeing us in a different way, so in terms of partnerships I hope there might be some mirroring, amongst people I know there is very much an awareness of things. But, I am probably bias because I work for the Trust, so it's not completely objective.

I: It is interesting thinking, because audiences are obviously a concern for our research, but again, we are not looking at segmentation or quantitative things. We are really looking at the qualities of that experience for a heritage visitor or a heritage interested person. And what it's like coming to experience these different contemporary art forms in these different places. So, we are do that in a very, kind of, qualitative way. I am now going to move on to the end of my questions, and one of my key questions is – well there are two things – whether there is a particular other project that you wanted to highlight? I remember you mentioned the early things at Tattershall, but is there any other particular projects you want to highlight? And then the other question is what you think are the key opportunities, issues or challenges for this field of practice? Those are my two main things.

R: Can I do two? Do you want images of these as well?

I: Yeah, I mean – I will tell you in a minute about – I will just finish off about telling you about some other work we are going to be chasing up anyway. So, yeah, if you have got images or any kind of reports or evaluations.

R: I will send you the evaluation.

I: That will be great, yeah.

R: It is by [Name], you may have spoken to [them]?

I: I haven't spoken to [them], no.

R: [They] used to be at Meadow Arts, but [they are] now independent.

I: Right, okay.

R: The two projects that I would highlight are Look! Look! Look! By Heather and Ivan Morrison at Berrington Hall. And Waterlicht which was not an Arts Council funded through the Trust, it was a really fantastic partnership where we hosted an amazing artwork with Abandoned Normal Devices.

I: Oh yes, I remember that was mentioned as a potential project at Gibside which is one of the places we work with in Northumberland.

R: Yeah, that is right.

I: But, it didn't happen there. So, yeah, okay.

R: No, I think the property manager was nervous, I think that was the reason. So, for five nights Winnats Pass which is an incredible gulley in the Peak District. We had about 6,000 people a night and you are under water in a blue, watery sea. And it was an amazing audience – it was local – and it got onto TV. So, it was a very happy partnership although the Trust were completely overwhelmed because they were unprepared for it. [Laughter]. But, it meant the team there now are really keen to do more, so that was a huge learning curve for that team, but a huge triumph, I think. And Look! Look! Look was again a very happy thing; the Morrison's have got a studio 20 minutes from Berrington. So, I said why don't you just have a conversation between the two of you? And they did, and Berrington found some R&D money and the Morrison's did one of the best R&D reports I have ever seen. And then from that they developed this new work, so it was their work that developed as a result of that project. And you can see in the report they did how the work developed. And then they did a piece recently in Munich that was an extension of that body of work and it's so satisfying to see how that started at Berrington. Because we found a bit of funding and they got on well and Berrington had this huge project that they wanted to highlight – The Walled Garden. So, those two I would highlight from the last year.

I: Okay. And what about my other question about the opportunities, issues and challenges for this area of practice?

R: There are fantastic opportunities, I think the [person] – [Name] – at Woodstock has got a really polarised view of this area of work. And [they were] totally enthusiastic having just opened a (unclear 41:29) exhibition, but [they] said, you know, artists don't the White Cube anymore. And I completely disagree with it, I think the opportunity for us is to present an alternative to the White Cube. And we have this incredible physical body of landscape and architecture and collections within the Trust and within heritage. And within an organisation like English Heritage or the Trust we have this incredible platform to speak about conservation issues, environment issues, sexuality, gender as well as history. And history is stories, isn't it? But they want to make it relevant today, so the opportunity is for us to think beyond the confines of each property and think, yes, it's about spirit of place. But, how is this resonating with someone in a city nearby who doesn't come here? And then the biggest challenge for me is the (unclear 42:47) area and the way that I see something – a way of working with that – is how Sutton House in Hackney work. Which is, their sub-properties should become very porous in that they work with groups and Sutton House has been given permission not to open to the public every day of the week. So, that they can continue this work, really, as a community centre, that is basically what they are now. So, I think that is a really interesting model and I think other properties should – and I think they are thinking – be leading the way at the moment. So, that the Trust can really address these issues of diversity, new audiences and engagement. And those are the big challenges, but luckily, they are the same ones facing Arts Councils, so everyone is on the same page. I think diversity is a very big issue with the National Trust, both with staff and programming.

I: Yeah, okay, that is brilliant, [R]. You have said some very useful things, so we will probably just draw this to a close. But, what I would like to say is

that our project continues for another year. So, July next day we are doing a two-day conference about this area of practice here at Newcastle. And we are about to start promoting our cooperate presentations for that conference very shortly – in the next couple of weeks. So, that will be going out, but I will send that to you directly as well. So, we are hoping there will be lots of people working in the sector who want to contribute to that, or at least come and have these conversations. Because there just seems to be such huge growth in this area at the moment.

R: Oh, it's amazing how this area has burgeoned, it's incredible. I would love to be involved, have you got a date for that?

I: **Yeah, it's the 29th and 30th July, next year.**

R: Okay.

I: **I will send you the cooperate papers and the deadline – I think- is the end of December to propose some sort of contribution. And the other things that we are doing is linked to this, sort of, mapping exercise and obviously that overlaps with some of the projects you have mentioned – some of which I am aware of. So, have been developing a database of projects that came from some material that Arts&Heritage who are a partner in the project.**

R: Yeah, I know them very well.

I: **They did some work for Arts Council gathering a mapping thing of existing projects. And we have built on that and we are just about to close that bit of research now. And from that we are hoping to build a Google Map of projects. Just a basic thing, because there is quite a lot of interesting material out there in terms of short videos and things in particular that we are trying to gather into one place as a resource. So, that is something that we are going to be doing over the next few months alongside all of the other stuff. But, I can be in touch about that later.**

R: That is brilliant.

I: **Hopefully that will be useful, I mean, it's certainly a way of drawing it together.**

R: Yeah, I will send you lots of the stuff from those projects.

I: **Please do, that will be great.**

R: And I should have said as well, [Name] is for the queen of this area, she got things going at Belsay and that was my other inspiration. I think she is absolutely fantastic and has been a pioneer in the field.

I: **As you might know she is part of the research team, she is a senior research associate on this project. So, yeah, it's great. Brilliant, thanks very much, [R], it has been really useful talking to you. Sorry I couldn't see you, but hopefully we will meet at some point.**

R: Yeah, I look forward to meeting you.

I: Yes, great. Thanks, [R] thanks for your time.

R: Okay, bye.

I: Bye.

[End of Recording].