

**A&HP\_MA\_Interview\_16\_Aug\_2018**

**Date:** transcribed 12th October 2018  
**Comments:** anonymised March 2021  
**Duration:** 00:54:20

**KEY:**

Cannot decipher = (unclear + time code)

Sounds like = [s.l + time code]

**I1: = Interviewer**

**I2: = Interviewer**

R: = Respondent

NT1 = National Trust Staff Member

EH = English Heritage Staff Member

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R: You're in my house now. Sorry about the time wasted.

**I1: It's fine, don't worry.**

R: So you were telling me about your project.

**I1: Well the first thing I'm going to tell you is that I'm currently recording our conversation, just audio recording it. Is that okay with you?**

R: That's fine, absolutely.

**I1: I mean normally with a face to face interview, obviously we would go through, we have a consent form and things and I would get your signature. But obviously we're doing it on FaceTime so I'm getting your consent over the audio by saying that I'm going to interview you for the sake of our research project. We might use your interview material obviously in our data but also potentially, we might come to use some quotations or something from the interview in publications or conference proceedings and things. If it's a long quote, we would normally get back to somebody and say, "Is that okay?" but if it's just something short, we would just use it. Is that alright? You're happy with that? Okay.**

R: Yes.

- I1: Well just to be formal, I'm [I1]. So I'm a Research Associate on this project and [I2] is here with me, who is also a Research Associate on it as well. It's a three year project led by Newcastle University and Leeds University. It's funded by the AHRC. We're about halfway through the project at the moment. The project has got three main strands. The first one is what we've actually been doing up until now, the first part of the project, is actually developing some commissions with National Trust, Churches Conservation Trust and also now with English Heritage, mostly in the North East. But that's a series of commissions that we've developed over the last year or so and they're all on site now currently over the summer, coming to an end in the autumn.
- I2: We commissioned Matt Stokes in a church in Sunderland, Mark Fairington for Cherryburn in Northumberland, Thomas Bewick's birthplace, Andrew Burton for Gibside and Fiona Curran for Gibside and Susan Philipsz for Belsay.
- I1: That's one of the main strands that we've been focusing on so far. Then a second strand is that we're now doing a series of focus groups with heritage visitors, arts visitors, looking at their responses to those artworks that we've commissioned. Then the third strand is what this interview is part of, which is what we're calling a mapping of the field. So we're trying to look at what is the field of activity in terms of contemporary art practice in the heritage sector in heritage sites, overlapping with the museum sector, looking at what's going on in that sector at the moment and also, historically, where has that come from and how has it developed, who's involved, artists, curators, arts organisations and heritage organisations. So this interview is part of that. I'm doing a series, not that many, but a series of interviews with curators and organisations like yourself.
- I2: So I gave [I1] a list of people who I thought were key, who were working within this field. I don't know if you've told [R] the others.
- I1: I haven't, no.
- I2: The other curators?
- I1: I haven't really shared that but I mean they're...
- I2: Yes, so they're people working within the field and you are...
- R: It would be interesting to know.
- I2: Yes. Who are they?
- I1: I can tell you who I've interviewed. Obviously we've interviewed Arts&Heritage, we've also interviewed obviously people from the National Trust, [Name] from Trust New Art, [Name] from Trust New Art, [Name] from the Arts Council here and I've just been interviewing other people from

**Inheritance Projects, Beacon Projects and Unravelled Arts. That's who I've been speaking to so far, so some independent curators but also people working with small arts organisations.**

**I2: If you can think of anyone else who is key to this, because it's all coming out of my head but if you can think... I mean I just thought of somebody today that I had forgotten about. So if you can think of anybody else.**

**I1: Yes, please get back in touch but we can remind you of that at the end of the interview. That would be good.**

R: Okay, yes, let's do that. I think we have, on both ends, we've got these moments we can't... it's funny, the reception, isn't it?

**I1: Yes, it is a bit funny. Can you hear us?**

R: We're alright though, aren't we?

**I1: We're alright. Let's carry on.**

R: I mean there's nothing much we can...

**I1: No. We'll make the best of what we have I think.**

R: Exactly.

**I1: So let me start the formal interview-y bit. It's not a questionnaire, I've just got some open questions really. Obviously I've talked to [I2] but also I've done a little bit of background research about Meadow Arts involvement. I don't know whether it was yourself or somebody else, [Name], who really kindly put in quite a lot of material into our open call that we had over the last few months about Meadow Arts project, which was absolutely brilliant. So I've got lots of background on your other projects there as well, which is fantastic so thank you very much for doing that.**

R: That's right.

**I1: So the first question is really about... go on. So the first question is just an open one. It's really for you to tell me about your history of engagement in this area of contemporary arts practice and including the partnerships that you may have developed with the heritage museum sector.**

R: So I think the most important thing to say is that for me, involvement with heritage was a fundamental part of the whole Meadow Arts idea because what happened was (unclear 00:07:01) contemporary art in the regions anyway. So when I arrived... sorry.

**I1: Go on, [R].**

**I2: We can hear you.**

R: Okay, fantastic. I'm a bit choppy. When I first arrived within Shropshire, which was 20 years ago, I was spending quite a lot of time up here. I was looking at what (unclear 00:07:53) in terms of contemporary art in general in the region and trying to see if there was a possibility of offering some actual material and showing some contemporary art. The two things that immediately came to mind was that there was no venue. It was incredibly under served. The facilities were non-existent although the artists were there and interest from artists existed. So I was faced with some exhibition space on the ground floor of a Georgian house that also was the entrance to a garden that was open to the public. So it fed my two interests, an interest that I thought could be crossed like contemporary art. That was heritage on one side and also gardens and the landscape.

So for me, putting this altogether, it became clear that there was going to always be huge difficulty in getting people anywhere to view contemporary art but that contemporary art could be presented as an extra layer to heritage viewing and garden/landscape public. So that's what I started to do. It worked really, really well but it's (unclear line cuts out 00:10:04), two or three Georgian rooms. So for me, that went easily together. Then I was (unclear 00:10:26), that's when the Arts Council became involved and they wanted to support the burgeoning Meadow Arts. So that's how I began (unclear line cuts out 00:10:45) and with a bit more help. Then I developed, that's not really relevant, a concept for an outdoor gallery that was actually based in a meadow, hence the name Meadow Hall. So that was in land and we planted the system of hedges, so in a way it was about art and gardens as it would have (unclear 00:11:20) in the 18th century and even before. So that was another natural development.

I think heritage is also very much about them, it's about place and the outdoors. But after that I was (unclear line cuts out 00:11:49). Very, very naturally, I started looking at other heritage sites to replicate that experience. At first I decided that I would not work with a heritage organisation and I went to Sudeley Castle which was privately owned and, I thought, would be easier than the National Trust. I was a bit reluctant. But it worked beautifully at Sudeley Castle. We had a fabulous exhibition. At the time we had an exhibition with Damien Hirst, Angus Fairhurst, all these very... it was in the ruins of Sudeley, quite amazing really. So it was a nice way to do it but then I realised there wasn't really an infrastructure for visitors. It was (unclear line cuts out 00:13:14) in a way it was a bit thin on the infrastructure. So then I did actually go to the National Trust and started, I think my first exhibition with them was near Worcester.

**I1: Hanbury Hall?**

R: Yes, Hanbury Hall, exactly.

**I1: Did you approach National Trust or did they approach you?**

R: I did. It was interesting because they didn't really know what was going on. It was a little bit... we've all worked with the Trust, that was probably ten years before joining Meadow Arts, well maybe not ten years but certainly they hadn't really

thought about contemporary art and heritage much at the time. So there was some missed opportunities let's say. But what was really interesting is that a lot of the show was outdoors because there wasn't that integration. I think that's one thing that maybe Meadow Arts does more than others, is to look at the heritage landscape in a sense. My seminal piece was really interesting. It was an artist called Jane Prophet who had amazing landscape photography, a garden and park photography and manipulated it diligently which, at the time, was novel. But she also made a piece that was a dead heritage apple tree in an old orchard in the grounds of Hanbury. It was called 'Souvenir of England'. It went in a globe, like a snow globe with a nostalgic piece.

It was very much that side of heritage in the gardens and in the landscape. (unclear line cuts out 00:15:58) beautiful dead swan that we showed by a willow. So that was the first of the (unclear line cuts out 00:16:08). After that, it became the norm of what we did for (unclear line cuts out 00:16:20). So we then worked at Attingham Park twice, at (unclear 00:16:33) three times. We worked in lots of spaces. I mean I don't know if you've got more questions about working with the National Trust because it's the whole fair that was...

**I1: I'm definitely interested in that. I'm interested in your choice initially to go with an independent property. I looked them up and I think they're part of this Historic Houses Association Trust which is for heritage properties which are still in private ownership. It will be interesting to think about your experience, what's the difference between working with a privately owned property and one that's National Trust.**

**I2: Can I ask a question? [R], did you know the owner of Sudeley? Did you know her personally?**

R: Yes, I did, absolutely.

**I2: So actually it's come from people?**

R: Yes, it's people. It's definitely people. She also had (unclear 00:17:53) in London at the time. So that was also useful.

**I2: I think it's that thing about finding people that understand what you're trying to do and then working with an organisation that perhaps thinks, "What on earth is going on here? We are a conservation and heritage organisation. Why are we doing art?"**

R: Yes. There were a few things here. I think the thing that interested Mollie Dent-Brocklehurst at the time was also to find an independent way for Sudeley Castle to go forward and actually, subsequently to what we did, asked me to do another show. I said no, for many different reasons. But I didn't really want (unclear line cuts out 00:19:06). Also, it looked, and it actually was true in the end but what she wanted to develop was quite a commercial model and whether it could have a big selling show (unclear 00:19:37) but do it in a more commercial way. I think we did Vertigo and then Vertigo 1, 2, 3. They were very good shows but they were very (unclear line cuts out 00:19:58), big worth, high net worth pieces. It

was interesting because it was a brush with the real commercial art world, for me, and I thought I'd learn to make money, which I didn't. I have no idea how to do that.

I mean it was interesting because it encroached on this other world of contemporary art which is very market led (unclear line cuts out 00:20:40) as it went for me. What I noticed, to answer your question, was that there wasn't really an infrastructure that was... it was incredibly difficult to (unclear line cuts out 00:21:00) engagement, the reflex.

**I1: So there was lack of infrastructure for visitors and audiences or for artists and curators?**

R: To engage with the audience. I mean the experiences of (unclear 00:21:22) or things like that but not really in terms of trying to work with artists and groups. So that was not going to work very well. Basically, I was more trusted (unclear line cuts out 00:21:41) the Arts Council who were looking at what I was doing and understood what I was developing. So I must say that for me, (unclear 00:22:01) to the Arts Council in terms of, and it sounds a bit goody-goody and whatever but it really was because I'm completely on my own. I think what the Arts Council was looking for was really, really essential in how Meadow Arts developed in the end because, yes, I was filling some of their tick boxes but I learnt how to run an organisation in a way. I mean from the development point of view it was important. So I was more able to do that when I was working say with (unclear line cuts out 00:22:56), there was a good meeting there of things that could be brought together.

**I1: So National Trust was a better fit for your interest in getting contemporary art to a broader audience with the Arts Council but was there also a difference between the sort of artists that National Trust was interested in or the model for working with National Trust as opposed to, as you've described, this more commercial blue chip artists at Sudeley?**

R: I think so, although I'm not really sure because I've always worked with a mix of commissions and borrowed works.

**I1: I was going to ask you about that.**

R: Which, for me, is the only work really because I don't have enough money to commission everybody as much as I would love to. But I suppose they wanted more really part of a project but it's a good question. It was a question of how reactive the artists would be but I always found (unclear 00:24:21) I approached. Going back a bit, one of the important things that I took from the very early days was to continue to have a curator project, so that was not a sculpture exhibit and is probably what I'm missing a little bit at Sudeley. They weren't trying to look at an approach that would make sense. It was more about showing work because it looked good. So it was, in a sense, always about getting artists to respond to a brief generated and inspired by sight.

**I1: You mentioned the word reactive, I think artists would be more reactive, is that what you meant, in response to the site?**

R: Yes, that's right.

**I1: I'm quite interested in working where there's two, maybe even in one show or project, working with these two models of having artists who are commissioned to respond and react to a site and then the idea of actually borrowing existing works and displaying those in that site. Can you say anything more about how that works, how those two models work in a place?**

R: Yes. Well there was a very interesting debate that's very much about curatorial approaches because, for example... I mean I've done this with every show and I keep doing... Attingham Park for example, we had a lot of works about different pieces but only two were commissioned. But the general idea, a lot of people thought that all the works had been commissioned. The show was called 'House of Beasts' but it was looking at all the different connections a big estate could have with animals. Of course it was quite a broad thing. But we even showed again there the swan that I had from Daphne Wright for the Hanbury show. It was this dead swan in white marble on a pedestal. But I showed it again because it fitted the whole thing again perfectly and people thought it was commissioned for this but it was also near the water and the swan but it was in a different context but completely relevant.

Then we borrowed Mat Collishaw 'Rape of Europa' that fitted beautifully in a big living room but it had been made twenty years before, I don't know when. So the idea was that, and the show that I'm doing now, I'm actually writing the guide, is again at Museum of Royal Worcester. It's a lot of work because really I can't afford more but for me it's a way for people to actually come into contact with really good artists' works in the regions. I find it (unclear line cuts out 00:29:05) so it's important to show them in a way people will understand it intellectually but appreciate it for the different things that it (unclear line cuts out 00:29:25) in a way that's really simple. I mean I'm doing this porcelain show at the Museum of Royal Worcester and I've got (unclear line cuts out 00:29:36) which is just a cup, the double handled cup. It's probably the first time a lot of people will have seen one. It's simple and it just fits the thing so for me, it's a way of critical mass in a way as well.

**I1: I've got some information I pulled off the internet about that project. So that's with the Canal & River Trust as part of the Art on the Waterways, is that right?**

R: Oh yes, that's right. That was last weekend, yes.

**I1: We've talked about the National Trust properties, which have mainly been the country house, garden, parkland kind of environment and then I noticed that more recently you've also done work with the industrial heritage museums, Coalbrookdale, Ironbridge, those sorts of places. I was**

**interested in that shift between the country house model and this industrial heritage. Why has that come about?**

R: (unclear 00:30:47) I was really keen to break the addiction to the big pile. You can quote me on that. It is a serious problem. You end up very, very often with big Georgian places (unclear 00:31:10) and we all know it and it's very interesting as a model. (unclear 00:31:17) take part and look at it and see how it all makes sense, especially in terms of the (unclear line cuts out 00:31:27) of this country, it's fascinating. For me as a French immigrant or whatever, it's a really interesting thing. A visit to the National Trust houses is a big part of this culture. It's been fantastic to (unclear line cuts out 00:31:50) again that's for sure but it was imperative for me to start to (unclear line cuts out 00:31:58) heritage different because that is the model that's so present, so prominent that... Ironbridge was fantastic. It was great to be able to be there. In the end, it was a little bit disappointing and I'm finding it quite hard.

We probably don't have the same problem in the North, in the northern places but around here there's a very strange feeling that sites that are not made over, refitted and rated, they can't be used. It was difficult to convince people that (unclear 00:33:01) spaces that were very eloquent and beautiful from an industrial heritage point of view but I don't know, there's a reluctance there. It's got to be proper. It was a bit of a shame that we weren't able to go in the building parts. I know there's a lot of health and safety issues but still...

**I1: Because it's still really...**

R: It's the (unclear 00:33:32) exhibitions.

**I1: Because it's still an industrial landscape or an industrial site, it's got these limitations about where you can place the work, is that what you mean?**

R: Yes, I think that's the thing, it looks too rough or it's too rough to show people. So we found that with our partners we were always pushed over to the (unclear 00:34:06), not gentrification but a lot of restoration and a lot of (unclear line cuts out 00:34:13) basically. But it was really great to work there.

**I2: [R], were you the first foray into contemporary art at Ironbridge?**

R: Sorry?

**I2: Were you the first time that they had worked with... why is that? Is it because it's me?**

R: No.

**I2: It's not great is it?**

R: Yes.



**I1: Sorry, we got cut off. Do you want to recap, [I2]?**

**I2: [R], was the work with Ironbridge the first time that they had seriously worked with a contemporary art curator?**

R: Yes, it was.

**I2: You started working with the National Trust when they hadn't got any experience, weren't you? Before Trust New Art, before anything, you were working with them.**

R: Yes.

**I2: Now, with Ironbridge, you're doing that again. So you're ahead of...**

R: With Sudeley Castle, with the private as well. This has changed so much. It's now become so... everybody does it.

**I2: I know, but you were doing it in a very difficult climate because I remember doing that trip with you and National Trust just didn't really... they weren't there, were they? The light bulb moment hadn't happened.**

R: They really weren't. But what was interesting was that there was a point, a national thing... I remember [NT1] right at the beginning, and it was a (unclear line cuts out 00:36:51) but the reality is that I was working with property managers and there was no involvement from anybody else. It was just at a very local level. You had to (unclear line cuts out 00:37:11) else nothing was possible. That wasn't very easy because there wasn't really any encouragement from that side. I know that there was a side where [NT1] was thinking about it conceptually, there was a lot of debate going on and (unclear 00:37:35) and a lot of people getting very excited but it didn't actually go down to...

**I1: Local level, property level.**

R: (unclear 00:37:47). I think they were aware of that because their development was to make those curators themselves which at that point we were gently, well we were going to do it anyway because I wasn't really wanting to continue on that side very much but I hadn't anticipated that it would then make it pretty impossible for me to come back, which I don't really want to do anyway because we're too busy. I don't really follow or really understand, I don't know what they're doing but I'd rather go work with... so our next few shows, we're working with museums directly a lot more, which is great because I really want to be able work with heritage in a way but very important. It's so important that, as museums, we can help make something happen with regional museums. We're working with cathedrals. So our next show, big project in January is Yinka Shonibare, whom we've commissioned to respond to the Mappa Mundi, which is this fabulous 12th century map in Hereford.

For us, heritage is really not just the Trust, it's the working with libraries, cathedrals, museums. We're working in an industrial setting with the amazing flax mills in Shrewsbury, which was (unclear 00:40:12) in the world, 1760, the ancestor of all skyscrapers. That's going to be really interesting and Hay Castle, which is going to reopen as an arts centre. So there's all these different but it's always heritage but not the preserve of the Trust or English Heritage. The big project next year is of course, ruins and that's with [EH]. So we're doing a big exhibition about contemporary ruins. So there's citing commissions there. Witley Court, which [I2] knows I'm sure, is this extraordinarily huge ruin. I mean it's a beautiful (unclear line cuts out 00:41:21). It burnt down in '37 so there's no roof, nothing. It's an extraordinary site. That's working with English Heritage and [EH], who was at...

**I1: Again, have all the projects that you've just mentioned, the Mappa Mundi, Hereford Cathedral, the flax mills and the English Heritage, are they all places that you... have you made that approach because those are places you want to work with or have they approached you, Meadow Arts or a bit of both?**

R: They've pretty much approached us. But it's conversations that develop the... things I think fall into place. But it's true that I think people are realising now that we do a lot of different things so they approach us more easily than when we working really with the Trust. For a number of years that really marked us a bit too much.

**I1: If English Heritage come to you to work with them or Hereford Cathedral come to you to work with them, what do they want out of the project? What is their agenda for the project? They're coming to you to provide something.**

R: Yes. I think that it has become a little bit of I want one too culture. I think big heritage organisations feel like it makes sense, for all the reasons that we've been clamouring for years, that it widens their public, it broadens their base, it's a way to fight against the fact that most of their members or visitors are that much older. I think that's a big project and that was the Trust's main focus really I think, this ageing three million members that just didn't know what was going to happen. But I think...

**I2: It's so frustrating, isn't it, when it cuts out?**

**I1: It is frustrating, yes. Hi.**

R: Let's hope it stays that way. For me, there's a lot of other reasons that have come and that people are happy to see. I wouldn't say it's a conscious choice but for me, working in the regions as I do, it's so important. There are no venues so each of these places carry the culturality to the wider audience. I think that's very important. They're seen as that, which is a bonus for them. I'm not sure they articulate it like that but it's a big thing and stepping in in a way because there are no other real ways of showing contemporary art. It's value for money in terms of the little bit of money that there is. It's a civic responsibility in a sense.

**I2: I agree, yes.**

R: (unclear 00:45:45) plays that role in carrying something of the present as well that you need to... it's a cultural space and it's just... the other thing is that there are critical debates going on, curatorial choices that we make, all of us. I think there's also a critical response, a way of remaining alert to what's going on, continuing a debate that's been going on for many centuries and staying relevant, staying aware in a sense.

**I2: Yes, absolutely.**

R: I think that (unclear 00:46:46) of heritage.

**I1: I mean that brings me on really probably to the last formal question I've got on my list which is what do you think are the key opportunities or issues and challenges for this field of practice? You probably said that keeping this critical viewpoint is possibly a key challenge.**

R: These are opportunities. I think there are other opportunities I think that in terms of funding it's also that... that's the biggest threat I think is really (unclear line cuts out 00:47:35). So the threats are that with the regional cuts that are happening everywhere, there's also a big threat where knowledge is held. I think the heritage sector is keeping some expertise and some of the cultural expertise that we have (unclear line cuts out 00:48:07) it's got to be somewhere. So I think there's an opportunity for the heritage sector to really play a role and to be present as a base for some kind of cultural life.

**I2: Do you think that because it's become so popular, if you like, to put contemporary work in heritage spaces, there may be a danger that it becomes popular and the festival model and the event model, the lighting projects, do you think there's a danger there?**

R: Yes. I mean I think there's certainly a danger of it being badly done. I think there's a big danger of it being badly done. There's a danger of it... okay, I'll say something but I'd rather that it didn't go out as it is but the idea that the National Trust are developing of the property managers curating, in that particular case, there's also a huge confusion with interpretation. So they want contemporary art to do the interpretation of everything and they also want design. They're using designers. So I think that is a big problem. It's a question of nuances. It's a question of (unclear line cuts out 00:50:21), it's a question of all these things and there's no reason why they shouldn't be able to do it. It's not about them. I'm not trying to say they're (unclear line cuts out 00:50:31) not what they've been trained for. In spite all the focus groups and workshops and whatever, it's difficult.

So I know that a lot of artists have suffered from the fact that there is no curating properly so that means also the money is there, it's difficult to develop without the expertise of the contemporary art curator but also that (unclear 00:51:05) point and it's just not in the right position. It's used as design. You can quote that it is becoming more trivialised to and to serve a (unclear 00:51:26) purpose as well.

**I2: I'm just going to nip out because we've got another meeting.**

**I1: Did you have any other questions, [I2]?**

**I2: No. You've been totally great. We'll meet up soon.**

**I1: [I2] has got to go. I'm going to join [them] in a minute but I'll just finish off. I mean that's probably come to the end of my real questions, [R]. Is there anything else that you wanted to say? Obviously we can come back to you at a later stage. We haven't got a brilliant connection so we can always follow this up later by email or a further conversation. But if there's anything you want to add.**

**R: Well no. What I think is that what you're doing is really, really important and great to be able to contribute more and to come together. I really believe we've got a lot to share.**

**I1: I think we have.**

**R: It will be great.**

**I1: Brilliant. I mean what I was going to say is if there's anything after this interview that you want... I mean I'm just wondering whether you have any... I mean I've got mainly the material that I found on your projects just from your website and things like that but if there are any catalogues or publications or if you're able to share any evaluation or any other reports and things around your work with us, please email me or if there's something you can send in hard copy, I can give you my address, just follow up by an email or something, that would be great. The other thing to say is that...**

**R: I'll mention it when the team get back and we'll see what else we can send you**

**I1: That would be brilliant. Just to finish off, next year, I mean I said we're about halfway through our project, next year our two big things that we're doing is we're doing a two-day conference on contemporary art and heritage here at Newcastle University. I think the dates for that are the 29th and 30th July next year so it will be great. I mean we'll be putting some more information on the website and it will be lovely if you can certainly come to that but hopefully contribute to that as well. We'll be doing a call for presentations.**

**R: That would be great.**

**I1: That would be fantastic. Alongside that we're also doing an exhibition at the Hatton Gallery about our project so there is more to come and there'll be all sorts of other things. There should be some publications and things coming out of this project as well. Thank you very much for speaking to us**

**and making the time. It's been really, really good, very interesting to hear about your experience. Thanks very much.**

R: Good, really good to hear.

I1: **Thanks. Bye, [R].**

R: Goodbye (unclear 00:54:12), bye.

**[End of Recording]**