

Mapping Contemporary Art in the Heritage Experience – Artists' Interviews

Audio File Name: FC_NT_Gibside_Interview_12_May_2018
Date: transcribed 12th June 2018
Comments: reviewed March 2021
Duration: 59.58

KEY:

Cannot decipher = (unclear + time code)

Sounds like = [s.l + time code]

I1: = Interviewer

I2: = Interviewer

R: = Respondent.

NT1, NT2, NT3 = National Trust Staff

I1: So I guess just before the formal interview bit, there are just follow on questions, commissioning process. I've switched round, as soon as I started thinking about it actively with Mark the other week, I kind of switched around the order. So it's kind of starting the creative practice, thinking about the commissioning process and inevitably, certainly what I found with Mark, was that a lot comes out anyway. So I think trying to follow the specific order of the questions seems to become harder, actually just because of the conversation, but we'll see how it goes. So, I guess, this is Nick Cass and Judith King interviewing Fiona Curran on Saturday the 12th of May after the Gibside opening last night.

I2: Do you want me to start?

I1: Yeah, if you want to.

I2: So, Fiona, could you just give us a quick description and overview of your project as it stands now?

R: Sorry, when you say a quick description?

I2: The opening, obviously we had the opening and you've completed it.

R: Okay, yes. So, I completed it a couple of weeks ago after an eight-day install. So had a gap and, yeah, we had the opening last night. Do you want me to go into detail in terms of construction or is that enough?

I2: No. We'll get into that. Has your project changed from its original proposal in your mind?

Mapping Contemporary Art in the Heritage Experience – Artists' Interviews

R: Very little, actually, in terms of the original proposal. Just slight changes in terms of dimensions, in terms of number of plants that were in it. So just very slight, sort of logistical changes rather than conceptual or intellectual changes.

I2: So it hasn't actually – it's developed in a way that you actually had thought of in the first instance, when you say Gibside....

R: Yeah.

I2: So, actually the next question about challenging areas that caused the idea to change or be compromised, that doesn't really happen?

R: It didn't really happen. I would say, actually, just to add to that: I suppose there was the one part of the project that I wouldn't say changed, but developed, has been more the research side of it. So the blog side of the project which I kind of see as an extension of the work in a way, even though it's obviously not something that everybody will necessarily access in terms of the public access, although it's there for people if they want to. I think that the blog really became a space where I was able to document a lot of the reading and research and visits and things like that I was doing. So I think that has a life of its own. So maybe that's something to mention. But yeah, the actual physical, sculptural object really didn't change.

I2: That's interesting that actually – because maybe with the other artists it kind of changed. So I just want to slip in another question here because it says, has the site or place narrative affected your thinking about the work, that you'd not anticipated? In your practice then, would you say, I mean, is this quite normal of how commissions work for you in site-specific places?

R: I think it is actually. Yeah. I think it is. In terms of the experience I've had of doing these types of commissions so far. I think it's also, it varies. I remember at the other interview actually, at the beginning when I said to you, one of the things that was quite difficult was that thing of being asked to give a budget in advance. I think certainly for the type of work that I make and this one in particular, because it was quite an ambitious piece of work, to try and really pin that budget down in advance. I really had to come up with something that was fairly thought through at that stage and that's not to say that I wasn't open to change, and I certainly would have been if I'd felt that the project either wasn't going to work or something, you know, from the site really kicked something up that made me have to rethink it. In a sense none of those things happened so I didn't have to adapt or rethink it. I just, as I said, tweaked it slightly in terms of dimensions and scale etc.

I think in terms of the forward planning for an ambitious project like this, I really did need to know actually quite clearly, from the start, what it was so that I could actually realise it. If it wasn't a project that was going to be unfolding over a six-month period and emerging and changing and adapting. It was very much, you know, I'm thinking about making a large scale sculptural folly in the landscape. So to radically change that would have radically changed the – well, not even radically, but to have changed that quite significantly would have changed the

Mapping Contemporary Art in the Heritage Experience – Artists' Interviews

budget, would have changed the, you know, all the planning etc. So I think that's probably why it really had to be quite pinned down.

I2: So would you say then, when you're having commissions like this for specific places, that actually the research is kind of top – at the beginning, that's where all the work takes place in actually making that proposal?

R: Yeah.

I2: So there's quite a lot of your thinking and planning and everything goes right at the very beginning?

R: At the beginning. I agree, definitely. I mean, I think I did a lot of research before even the interview. A lot. So, I mean, I'd visited [s.I Q 0:05:51], I'd already consulted quite a lot of books and documents and had conversations with people. So that had certainly really started to take shape very early on. Then, as I was saying about the blog, subsequently just developed that research because I became really interested in it. So that research interest has definitely carried through the project. The core of it was done right at the start.

I1: That's really interesting because I was thinking of a similar question around that within the paid process of the actual commission, acting for the substantial work is happening before that in terms of the conceptual thinking, the structure of that, which is quite fascinating in terms of...

R: Certainly for my practice, I think, yeah.

I2: Okay. That's me.

I1: Okay. So I guess that does take us to the commissioning process. Following on from those answers, this would be quite interesting. This is about the kind of requirements of the commissioner. Have there been any particular requirements of the commissioner, and by that, I guess we're perhaps thinking both of those and Gibside. Is there anything that's particularly affected the development of your thinking or the work?

R: I don't think there was anything really in particular that affected the work. I think – I'm not sure if this is the place to bring this up, but in terms of the process, there was an issue around planning permission that became a little bit fraught, shall we say, in that in my very early meetings with the commissioner, meaning the National Trust Commissioner, in October, you know, we started having conversations about planning permission then. It was quite a clear conversation. I said that my preference was to try and get that planning permission underway as soon as possible, particularly because I had got this plan already in place in a sense; there was no reason why that needed to delay, they could get that together.

Ideally, I was saying that I thought putting it in prior to Christmas would be a really good idea and at that time the indication was that would happen. Then I very clearly communicated verbally and, I think, by email at that point, about what do you need from me? So I sent some visualisations through. I was asking if they

Mapping Contemporary Art in the Heritage Experience – Artists' Interviews

needed scale drawings and everything because it's not something I have the skills to do so I would have to get someone to do it. So there was a sort of conversation about that. I got a very relaxed, fine, great, thanks for sending the visualisations through. This is underway sort of thing. So I didn't really think about it again and then picked that back up again after Christmas. It probably wasn't even until about February time. I can't quite remember the timeline now, but, you know, around February time to discover that the process of that hadn't even begun. So there was a sense, at that point, where I was quite alarmed that we were now in February and thinking how long planning permission can sometimes take. Also, not just that but in terms of if there was an issue with the planning.

Obviously, that would be assuming that everything went smoothly. We were talking about a listed site so when you're talking about any particular requirements, there were discussions over interventions into the site. There was a big concern over any groundworks or disturbance archeologically. Most of what I was proposing wasn't going to affect any of those decisions, but we did initially think that we might use ground anchors which are quite simple, kind of, spot screws in the corners just to sort of fix the structure. We didn't think they were – we, meaning me and John Smith, who was helping me build the project, we didn't think that they would be necessary, but we thought this might be a good thing to do just as an extra supporting system. So we did say that that would be a minimal intervention but it would require going into the ground. So we'd flagged these things up very, very early.

At that point there seemed to be such a relaxed attitude to it all as though nothing was going to be a problem, but then as it got closer to the time of actually doing the project, suddenly there was a bit of a frantic kind of activity around the planning permission. Then I was told that they needed scale drawings and they needed them by, you know, the end of the week and things like that. So it was kind of, hang on a minute, we've already had these conversations. So then I flagged up again, I can't get these to you by the end of the week. I need to commission somebody to do them so I'll need to find someone. So I was kind of reaching out to say is there anyone who could do this? And then again, they sort of came back with, oh don't worry, we'll sort it out, it will be fine. Then again, another few weeks later got another – we were in an actual physical meeting at that point with the team and it got brought up again. Oh we still haven't had those scale drawings. It was kind of, you know...

So in terms of talking about the requirements of the site, that did cause quite a bit of anxiety for me; particularly, I think, at that meeting particularly I realised they hadn't even – I can't remember when that must have been, March by this time and they hadn't even gone in.

I2: Yeah, it was March and the planning hadn't gone in. The was no control about that.

R: No, and at that point I'd already, for example, then committed quite a lot of the budget because I'd started to buy the plants. I'd already outlaid quite a lot financially. There was a moment at which, I think I remember saying to you, Judith, I really thought, there was a moment at which I thought this project might not actually happen. It might not happen because if you don't get the planning

Mapping Contemporary Art in the Heritage Experience – Artists' Interviews

permission we can't do it. Then what happens in this situation? I've just spent quite a bit of money and, you know. So yeah, I think there was a bit of anxiety, quite a lot of anxiety caused over that process because, I think, just because I kept being told it was underway and everything was in hand and it was all very relaxed, and then suddenly there was a bit of a frenzied – I mean, in the end, I never even got the word about whether it had been approved or not. It just...

I2: I still don't know whether planning has been approved.

R: We don't know. I never saw anything.

I2: No.

R: It just kind of, you know, it was just assumed that it had materialised.

I1: So this is definitely the right place to have raised that. Absolutely. No, because that is really important because it affects the process of simply delivering the brief, you know, and that level of anxiety because of a miscommunication of something not happening which should have done, I think is really important. As you say, actually, they may have come back and said, well, no. If you're going to make that structure, that location isn't going to work for whatever reason. So it needs to be there which would change the scale...

R: Yeah, and the concept and everything.

I2: It's a really interesting area this. I think, I mean, what you're revealing there which I'd kind of forgotten about because it sort of went into crisis and then it sort of...

R: Disappeared.

I2: ...disappeared. That actually happened, I would say three times at Gibside.

R: Yes.

I2: The leaflet was one like that where everything assumed it was all right and then became a crisis. Then, you know, somebody had to deal with it.

R: And the volunteers issues.

I2: And the volunteers issue where you thought that was underway and then everybody is sort of looking around, sort of going like this, and it became a crisis.

I1: What was the volunteers' issue?

R: Yeah. Again, through the communication, right the way through, I'd said because it was a big, ambitious project, very physical. I had to work out, you know, where was this work going to be produced because it's something that would be very difficult to build offsite. So the idea really from the start was always that as much

Mapping Contemporary Art in the Heritage Experience – Artists' Interviews

as possible the work would be done onsite. So right from, even at the interview stage, I can remember saying is there somewhere I can stay onsite, or near site? Is there somewhere I could work? Is there a workshop available? So we had had these conversations and some of that had been sorted out quite early on. So there was a triple space work shed out in the yard which is used for the volunteers and also for the tools and various things.

So they had agreed to allocate two thirds of that space as a work space because it's undercover; so it would provide some protection from the weather etc. So that was great. That was agreed early on; but we'd had quite a lot of – or certainly, I'd thought we'd had lots of conversations about other support, as in actual hands-on support from people. One of the, I mean I use this word quite advisedly now, but one of the narratives I think that they had, as a team, was very much about this fantastic volunteer community that they had. It was something that kept being brought up at every meeting was, we're so lucky because we've got this fantastic group of volunteers, really hands on, they love to get stuck and do things.

Also, the other part of the narrative was, we'd really like them to be involved in the project. As much as possible we would love them to be involved in the project, so if there is any way in which you can get them involved and Ed, particularly, was saying from early on, we'd love you to come and meet them and maybe give a talk to them. Talk about your work to get them onboard and, you know, so that all sounded great because I knew I was going to need hands on help. I said from early on I would need people to help with the production work in terms of the painting of the plants; probably not the actual construction on site because obviously I was employing somebody to do that and subcontracting that side of things, but you know, having a couple of pairs of hands around just to help move things would also help in doing some physical work – painting all the wood etc, etc.

So I'd already, to a certain extent, pre-thought through what was going to be needed on site and I thought quite clearly communicated to the point that even in some meetings I said, "I just want to clarify that the work will be quite physical so I'm aware that a lot of your volunteer group are retirement age or over and I'd be asking them to do some quite physically demanding work, which isn't what everybody is going to be either interested in or capable of – so I just want to double check, is this okay, kind of thing?" Again, I got a very affirmative answer back that this wasn't going to be a problem because I was thinking at that point, if that was going to be a problem, I would look for some students from the University. Obviously, being a University project, that would be a really easy source of, you know, and great for the students' experience etc. So I'd already got that as my back up plan, you know, if they were telling me, oh we don't really think our volunteers can do this. So those were the conversations.

Then, when I actually turned up at Gibside, nobody materialised at all in the first couple of days when I got up there before the weekend. So the tail end of the first week was meant to be finishing off the painting of all the plants and then from the following Monday would be the actual onsite construction build part. So I was suddenly faced with this really huge physical task of finishing off the painting of the plants; and also, all of the structure was being delivered. John did actually decide to build that offsite as a kind of potential kit – delivered it on the Friday to

Mapping Contemporary Art in the Heritage Experience – Artists' Interviews

the site in kit form, well most of it on the Friday, in kit form. Really heavy load stuff. I mean, it needed three or four people to move some of the individual pieces. So even when we got it into the woodshed, I could paint one side but then I couldn't move it to paint the other side.

So with the best will in the world of throwing more time and energy and hours at it, which I was doing, I couldn't physically actually complete the job without additional support. So I did as best I could on the Thursday, Friday, Saturday and then on the Saturday I just actually rang Judith and said – I was exhausted at that point. My fingers were swelling up and I had to realise my own limitations. It was kind of this is crazy – "I cannot do this without support. This project is not going to happen without support." So that was at crisis point. Judith then very brilliantly communicated with [NT3] who then communicated with the Gibside team and then suddenly everybody went into kind of panic mode and started emailing everyone and then everyone was apologising – "Oh we didn't realise, dah-dah-dah..." And, I tried at that point, I didn't get angry or upset about it because, you know, I was also trying to self-analyse the communication; but I think what it did do is it did make me question my professionalism because I think, partly also because I was very tired, and my confidence dropped over that weekend.

R: Also, to be fair, I mean that's why I think I was trying to rationalise it a bit over the weekend. It certainly wasn't about pointing the blame. It was just a breakdown in communication. I had a really nice chat with [[NT2] actually because [they were] very apologetic and [they were] sort of saying, you know, Gibside is such a huge site and they're a small team and they do have to cover an awful lot of stuff that's going on across the site. [They] said, they have very, very clear systems.

They have like check lists, to the point in the morning they come in and it's like who's doing what, who's on duty, who's doing, you know. So [they] said it very much in terms of, we work with systems. I was saying, the problem with artists is that, you know, we do try to plan ahead and we try to communicate what we're doing but it's not very system orientated. It's a very fluid changeable system. We have to see how things are going on the day and how things are, you know, I can't tell you this will be done by here. It's a process because often you are – well, most of the time you are producing something you've never produced before.

So you're kind of – the way I described it to them is you have a framework. It's not a blueprint, it's a framework within which you have to have this flexibility because you've got this structure and you're saying, okay this is what I'm aiming to produce and based on my previous knowledge this is how long I think it's going to take; this is what I think I'm going to need; but there will be changes in that process and things that happen. Things might take longer or you might need more people onboard. Just like I was saying, the sheer physical weight of that stuff meant that getting it from the woodshed, down the path to the orangery was a big physical demanding thing. It was only a half-hour job but it just needed a lot of hands on deck for a half-hour job.

I1: Yeah.

Mapping Contemporary Art in the Heritage Experience – Artists' Interviews

R: The way they'd communicated the volunteer support thing was that people would be around. That was how it was communicated. There's always people around, but there weren't people around. The staff were around but they just sort of came and, "Oh do you want a cup of tea?" It was just this lovely niceness of would you like a cup of tea. It was like, well, you know...

I1: No, I need ten people!

R: Exactly! And it was, at one point I did feel like sort of saying, "I don't want a bloody cup of tea, I need some physical support," which is awful because they were so lovely. I knew they were all onboard.

I2: I know. It's disarming.

R: They were onboard so much in terms of the idea of it, but there was a point at which I thought, they've bought into the idea but they're just seeing the end. They just want – they were so excited about the idea of what it was going to look like; how it was going to engage their audiences but I really got the feeling they thought the whole thing was just going to be delivered and put there – there would be no kind of disruption. There would be no...

I1: I think what's really important about that, as you quite rightly say, it isn't about pointing blame, it is actually saying, look at the consequences of what is going on here; but it also points to them having no idea of what making an artwork means.

R: Yes. Yes.

I1: Absolutely no idea and I think that's really important because, you know, it's a sense of it will magically appear. What they don't do is look at you as an individual person and say, okay, there's one physical person and this idea – what's the relationship?

R: Yeah.

I1: Like most, you know, it might be a rubbish analogy but most people go into a garage with their car and they kind of say, "I don't quite know how but can somebody fix this?" You kind of hand it over and I guess what they were doing was looking at you and just defaulting to you...

R: Complete default. Yeah.

I1: You are the person who will make that happen. We can just make you a cup of tea and be supportive.

R: Yeah. Yeah, completely. Completely.

I2: I think it's really important to feed this back to them. I don't know how, but I think it's really important because if that site is going to continue commissioning contemporary work, they've actually had two artists whose work has not changed – well, actually, that's not true. One artist whose work

has not changed really significantly from the proposal that they have been involved in right from the start; and referring to the conversation you, Nick and I were having at the table this morning about other sites in the National Trust who have been working with artists who suddenly present a very different proposal from what they had agreed to – they have had an artist who has actually delivered what you said you were going to deliver; and they have been involved in that choice of that artist and they need – they really do need to address the buy-in and the responsibility that they have in this commissioning process. I don't know how we do that, but we must do that, I think.

R: I mean, I think I had a really good conversation with [NT2] and I had a really good conversation with [NT1] about it. [NT1] and I met in the café on the Monday morning and [they] kind of almost took control again on the Monday morning. They did then, I have to say, from that point forward they were great. They did get a lot of people involved then and they sent the word out to their volunteers twice and got people in. They called in staff and, you know, so from the Monday afternoon, I did get some help. Obviously, it was too late really. I mean, I'm not saying it wasn't help, it was fantastic, but there's things then about the project...for example, with the painting of the plants – I would really like to have done two or three coats of paint topcoat on those plants and some of them went in with just one coat. So I'm still slightly anxious about that in terms of the longevity of that for the six months. I think it will be fine, but you know, it may need a bit of topping up maintenance later in the year, which is also fine; but that's the consequence of it.

There was, I mean, I'm actually amazed, to be honest, that we did manage to get it done and bring it in by the end of the week. I mean, I did have to keep John and Phil onsite for an extra day, but I don't think that was particularly impacted by the lack of volunteers. I think that was just...

I2: Did you have to pay for an extra day?

R: Yeah, yes. I mean, budget wise – oh, we can maybe talk about that later, but yeah, there's been lots of extra increases in the budget; but that's inevitable and to be honest, I still put in contingencies, and you know. But yeah, I did have a very good conversation with [NT1] about it; and [NT2] separately and did explain again this sort of thing. I said, it doesn't help me now but in future, you know, you do need to be aware of that. I said, having said that, obviously every commission is different. I said, also you have to decide what kind of artist you want to work with. There are some artists that will do everything offsite. You barely see them and they will just turn up and deliver something. If that's what you want, that's fine, but you just have to identify that that's the type of artist that you want to work with, and you don't want someone on site if you feel that's too disruptive or too much to handle.

I2: But you see, they missed a trick with you being on site in that you are visible; and your work in practice is visible. That's an education, you know, informative experience for people. So they missed a trick there. I really think we ought to feed this back somehow in a constructive way.

I1: Yeah, absolutely.

Mapping Contemporary Art in the Heritage Experience – Artists' Interviews

R: Yeah, constructive way. Yeah.

I2: But there's a common thing that's coming through – planning, volunteers, leaflet, that is...

I1: I think this has always been my argument about the focus on what the visitor understands, you know, is fine, but actually the site staff are people who are engaging with contemporary art in a way that they never have done before. That is equally, if not more important because they're ultimately going to become bigger advocates for the site to continue to have contemporary art. So the impact of their understanding of your process, how that thing happens, is really fundamentally important.

R: Yeah.

I1: Kind of exponentially in comparison to what one visitor might understand – I mean, that's maybe an oversimplification, but...

R: And the volunteers in the end. I think that was also key because by the time the volunteers and staff did get onboard by the following Monday, I think there was an understanding then – just the literal understanding of having seen me, as you said, physically. The people were turning up for work at eight in the morning and I was already on the site painting. Every morning and it was just the nods and the, "Oh morning" – just the, "Oh right, you're busy." Still there when everyone was leaving to go home, you know, going off on Friday for the weekend – "Oh, have a nice weekend." It was like, "I'll be here." I think there was a sense of that gradual – it took a few days really. It took Thursday, Friday, obviously over the weekend. So I do think by the Monday and then obviously the email had gone out, two emails, I think there was then a real sense of – I don't know if, you know, respect of whatever it is; but oh gosh, this person is actually here physically doing this.

I think there is an assumption sometimes about artists, that we're a bit...

I2: Yeah, a bit flaky.

R: Yeah, we just kind of float above it all and these things just materialise. It was like, no, they could see and a couple of people kept coming over – "god, you know, this is hard work, isn't it?" "Yeah! It is hard work." I know it doesn't necessarily have to be and again, that depends on your practice; but mine is a very physical, hands on, engaged, you know, practice. I do think this one totally pushed me to the limit of, you know, I described it to someone the other day as being a bit like an extreme sport – not that I've ever done an extreme sport; but how I imagine an extreme sport to be. There was a moment at which I just felt I was absolutely at the limit of my both physical and psychological being. I was just completely on the edge of collapse. As I said, my fingers were swelling up and I was physically, sort of, I can't do this anymore.

Then you have to just kind of step back from it and think, okay, hang on a minute, what do I need to do here? What support do I need? I can't do this so I have to accept I can't do this; what do I need to happen? Then as soon as I reached out

and communicated and things kicked in and I did get that support, it was fine. I was able to pull back a little bit. Even on one of the days, I think it was Tuesday when we were actually installing our site and John was there building, I had too many volunteers – five volunteers, “oh what can I do; what can I do?” I was able to leave them painting the last bits of wood in the shed and actually leave that work and go and be on the site with John and just not doing anything physical but being able to think about it; and think about the positioning of it; and think about – you know, we were talking about how it was going to line up with the orangery.

It was just suddenly having that gift of time to just be able to kind of be in a different space for the project – to think, okay, this has been my concept, my idea, my visualisation. Now we are actually here and we are going to put the groundwork down. Where do I actually want it to sit in relation to the structure? How do I want it to be viewed and seen? It was fantastic suddenly having that moment of space just to be able to do that, but I hadn't had that for four or five days. So yeah, that was a bit of, it was an ordeal.

I2: I think [NT3] could do with listening to what Fiona has to say. I don't know. There's something that needs to be – it really does need to be addressed, I think, if – which I think they want to do, it needs to be in a constructive way and it needs to be a conversation...

R: I think on sites generally, whether it's Gibside or anywhere else, it's that thing of, I think having largescale things that need to be produced onsite, I think it's a really key issue. I know that's not always possible, but lots of National Trust properties do have these spaces where things can be constructed and that's a really positive thing. Again, as you were saying, it's a very visible space, it means it can bring people in. It can give them a chance to observe what's happening. I think that's really key to have that opportunity to work onsite.

For me, it's much better to do it that way than to think about producing everything offsite and just delivering it. There's something about the experience of being on site and how that feeds into what's happening with the work, the conversations that you're having with people. I have to say, the end point of it, the last few days of it were a very positive experience. I just wish that had been from the moment I arrived. We did get there in the end.

I1: Yeah. I mean, that has, I guess in a way, that has kind of covered a lot of the questions. There is a question here about – given that these were written a few weeks ago – as we approach the installation dates, is there anything that you feel particularly nervous or uncertain about? So presumably, from what you've said, actually it was the ability to deliver it on time for the opening?

R: Yeah. I mean, I wouldn't say leading up to it I was particularly nervous about anything except, I think, the plants side of it for me. I take some responsibility of that way before the volunteer issue and that's just because I underestimated how much time that was going to take and just in terms of life intervening, I just happened to move house and move studio in the build up to the commission. So I probably lost a month of studio work where perhaps I could have done more prepping. That's just me being slightly over prepared in terms of I probably would

Mapping Contemporary Art in the Heritage Experience – Artists' Interviews

have painted as many as I possibly could before I got up there, but that was never really the intention.

My intention in the way I communicated was always that I would like to do that part of the project on site, but I realised very quickly when I got them delivered, this was a much bigger task than I had assumed. Just the technical nature of them, the working that out with the plants because they were all different kinds of plastic and surface. So they took different kinds of paint and then the priming and I had a bit of testing to do and things that didn't work, and then had to get other specialist primers. Sort of boring stuff but obviously important for research that I did, you know, there was a lot of things I had to figure out and do; and then just hadn't quite realised that whole thing of having to prime every leaf on both sides twice before you even get to to put the colour on it. Just the sheer amount of time it takes to prime one of those giant leaves.

There were just loads of them and they all came as separate – you get the trunk and then you get a pack of the leaves with it and it was suddenly like, oh my god, actually this is quite a, you know, each one of these is several days work, basically. That was my underestimation, but then again, it's like, I've never painted giant plants before. It's not like you can draw from prior experience or go and google it or something. I mean, it's just one of those mad – so I have the rare moments when I'm standing in the studio or even – what are you doing? This is just completely insane. Just this production line of priming all these leaves. Anyway...So, yeah.

That's hard because it's not knowledge I'm then necessarily going to take into any future projects unless I happen to decide to paint the giant plastic plants again. So it's sort of this weird production of knowledge that doesn't really go anywhere or contribute to anything.

I2: No, that's right.

R: And the next project might have something equally bizarre in it that you have to start from scratch again on learning how to do it. I think of Kielder when we had to wire the fence and Peter making up that amazing contraption. We had these fencing poles that were too big for a traditional wiring machine because we wanted a very high – it was a structure I made for Kielder Forest and we had to mock up a kind of wiring machine. Peter, the curator who worked with me, he was fantastic because he's really good at thinking through those things.

So we had this very, you know, mad contraption where we were turning – but again, it will probably never be used for anything else, but it was a solution to the problem at that time. Each project is like that.

I1: That's really interesting. I guess, probably the last bit around the commissioning process, again, this is slightly pre-post the installation – was there anything you were kind of unexpectedly positive inspired enthused about? You know, this is an unexpected aspect of the process?

R: Well, I suppose the unexpected bit in terms of the being on site bit, maybe. That was really important. I wouldn't say it was unexpected because I think I've had

Mapping Contemporary Art in the Heritage Experience – Artists' Interviews

that experience before when I've been on site; again, Kielder is a perfect example of that. The amazing experience when I was at Kielder of being able to stay in the artist studio and have that unfolding kind of response to the place. Even though again the commission didn't change dramatically, it was just being able to be and dwell there over a period of time before the actual install. With Gibside, even though that was very truncated into those kind of eight days, whatever, nine days – being given the opportunity to stay in the cottage on the site was really significant, I think, for me – not just logistically in terms of you could just get up and walk across to the yard to get to work, but to actually in the evenings come back and be in that amazing, amazing space on the estate after it's closed and locked up. It's a gift. It's an absolute gift and that's a very special, unique part of these projects which I don't think people realise.

It is those moments, actually. For example, when I was incredibly physically exhausted and drained, I just made my dinner and I sat outside on the bench. Everything was completely quiet except for birdsong. There was no one around. Even the people in the house were out, I think, so it was just me on the estate. That was a very restorative kind of nurturing experience that enabled me to just keep things in perspective and to just try and handle the situation and deal with it in a way that I think if I'd had to then get in the car and drive somewhere to stay, in a hotel or a B&B or something, I think would have been really hard. Really hard.

I think being able to just be in that space, that was super, super positive and yeah, nurturing I think would be the right word for it. So that's probably the key thing, I would say, that came out of it. I wouldn't use the word unexpected, but perhaps, just really important.

I1: Important to acknowledge. Yeah.

R: I think the other part of this project that was very positive was the blog actually. I think with all of these projects that I do, there's always this huge amount of research that I do. I suppose that never is given a voice really in the sense of a significant voice. It's always just been kind of for me. I think that this project, because I had to keep a blog, it enabled me to have this space where I was documenting all of this. So that's why I was saying, I suppose, back at the beginning where I feel that this is almost an extension or another dimension to the project, which again feels important. It doesn't matter that people look at it or don't look at it in relation to the piece, but somehow the fact that it has a public platform feels like people can maybe have another opportunity to see something else in relation to it which is good.

I2: So is it important for you that reflection is – because what you're talking about in the blog, you are talking about kind of ridding yourself, I suppose, of the knowledge that you have and the research, and then you talk about sitting in the landscape after work and that's about sort of having that time to just be still; and to have that reflection?

R: Yeah, so you're right. Reflection, yeah. I think so.

I2: So it's both about reflection – it's the blogs about reflection and the sitting in the landscape is about reflection.

Mapping Contemporary Art in the Heritage Experience – Artists' Interviews

R: Yeah.

I1: I mean, maybe not for now, but I think perhaps some questions to follow up towards the end of the project relate to then the legacy of those experiences because presumably there's a significant amount of how, while your knowledge of how long it takes to paint a plant leaf might not be used again, your experiences and feelings in that restorative sense of being in a place will carry forward within you, as a practitioner, for a substantial amount of your continuing making, kind of career.

R: Yeah.

I1: So that would be really interesting to follow up that sense of legacy.

R: I think there has definitely been an impact for me on the thoughts about my physical involvement in projects from this one, in terms of I know, as I said, well, as you saw from me getting upset – it was too much. So going forward, I know I can't take on a project that involves that kind of physical commitment again. But that means I either have to completely ensure that the support is there on site, or I have to pay other people to do it. I've got to reflect on that more now in terms of going forward because I am such a hands-on person and a maker, I like to make the work; but I really realise through this project that that's not going to be possible. I'm getting older and it's actually just, you have to realise your limitations and it was like, oh okay. I did it, but it wasn't...

I2: No, it was at a cost. Remember, you were going through house...

R: I know, there is that and I do keep trying to put that in perspective that actually I did a house move and a studio move and went straight into this. So physically and, yeah. I was low in terms of resources.

I2: Absolutely. You will have been not in control really of that.

R: Yeah.

I1: Yeah, I moved house five years ago from being in Leeds to Saddleworth and I found it quite emotionally distressing in a way that I just hadn't accounted for. It was just really strained.

I2: It sort of comes at you.

R: Yeah.

I1: Are you all right? Do you want a break before we go on?

R: Yeah.

I2: I'll just check to see where Andrew is.

I1: I guess, while you're doing – I guess this is a very general single question for this big area of heritage. So I guess it is really about the fact that we talked a lot about what that meant. You were the person we interviewed first and we went, oh my god, we can't have heritage as the first question. So we switched round and I guess this is, you know, how have your thoughts developed? Have they developed? How are you thinking about what heritage means now? I guess that's just a starting point.

R: I don't necessarily think they have developed that much in terms of if I recall the conversations correctly and you may be able to remind me a bit. I seem to remember that I spoke a lot about the idea of – for me heritage wasn't something that was fixed. It was static and that I really thought of it being connected to notions of living histories. I think even last night we were having some conversations about Gibside and the focus being on Mary Eleanor at the moment. I mentioned how from the research that I did initially, and also from being on site, there are all these other histories that are at Gibside which may or may not be explored at certain points in terms of prior to Mary Eleanor; and developing the estate.

We had a really interesting conversation about the surrounding landscape and how it might have looked as an industrial landscape and then obviously the later histories, or more recent histories to do with it during World War II. So I think it's that sense in which for me – and again that spending time in a landscape gives you some kind of, not necessarily access to that in terms of knowledge, because you wouldn't – just spending time in a landscape doesn't mean you know about how the house was used or when it was used and who it was used by; but there is something I think about – I always describe my practice as being about the poetics and the politics of landscape.

The politics is the bit you can find out and go off and discover and read about or what have you or be told about. The poetics is the bit that I think is the much more undefined side of it in terms of some sort of emotional, you could say spiritual relationship to place. I don't underestimate that in terms of its significance of how it impacts on you. I think perhaps that's exactly what I was just talking about, about having that time, that restorative or that reflective time as you put it, Judith, in staying on site. There's something then that you're absorbing something from that environment that is not easy to put into words and cannot be catalogued through the written historical text. But yeah, I still think there is something really hugely significant about that.

There's something for me about how that carries something to do with heritage but it's an intangible thing. It's something to do with that thing of that place having been subject to these lives and histories and, yes, okay it's been ringfenced as a heritage site and what does that mean? But maybe that's part of it. There's this ringfencing of these spaces as a heritage space is just to say that these are spaces where maybe we take the time to reflect or pay attention or to be without the normal kind of structures of life busying around us kind of thing. There is something about that just being there and just kind of feeling it and experiencing it that I think is a really significant part of heritage, that isn't about pinning it down to this happened there and this is the date that this person was born; this is how they changed this landscape and constructed this. It's something else that is all those

Mapping Contemporary Art in the Heritage Experience – Artists' Interviews

multi-layered histories of that landscape are kind of circling around you in that space. I think that's kind of, for me, that's a really important part of the experience and definitely feeds into the work.

Again, it feeds into the work in ways that are not easy to define. I think maybe even when you were saying last night, when I gave that short little speech on the steps of the orangery, you were saying you felt it was quite poignant that bit where I kind of turned and, you know, I kind of felt it too. Maybe that's that moment in which you are saying, okay, there's all this research and I know that she built this orangery and this is where she spent her time, but it's all very abstract, but suddenly in that moment it becomes very real. You have that sense of those histories are then very, very present suddenly in the now.

I2: It was quite interesting last night when you did that actually because you had been talking for quite some time, and you felt like you were coming to the end, but suddenly you turned round and you saw the orangery. You suddenly had no more to say. It was very interesting to watch you because you had explained, explained, explained, explained and you had been actually facing the audience and you had been talking about it; then you suddenly said, and this is – in a way this is a recognition of a woman. You sort of turned round to that massive – and then you had no more to say.

R: Yeah.

I2: It was really quite, you know, it really struck me that there was no more to say; and actually, everyone else realised there was no more to say because everybody started clapping.

I1: Yeah.

I2: So it kind of finished it off.

R: Yeah.

I2: Because that was it.

R: Said it all, kind of thing.

I1: I mean, and that, I remember saying to you last night that it was quite beautiful, but I think there was something that was poetic about it in the way that all of those kind of things came together at this really interesting moment. It was very...

I2: It was and it was actually – what it was, it was the architecture. Weirdly, the architecture of that orangery and next to the thing. It just – it was quite striking. Anyway...more than a, like if you go to the Foundling Museum and you see those little tokens. That emotional response to these little, tiny tokens is huge. To an architectural piece, it's difficult – especially one that has gone into ruin. You can't make that – it's difficult to make an emotional context.

I1: Yeah, and because it's kind of an archetypal form, it's this bay thing with arches that had plants in and you just think, oh I've seen multiple of those. But then it suddenly became...

I2: It's imbued with that sort of...

I1: Very particular sort of structure. Physically that combination of the thing, the story, the person, that moment.

I2: It becomes very symbolic, doesn't it, which is very...

I1: Powerful.

I2: Yeah.

R: Yeah.

I1: Completely fascinating. Okay. I suppose its audience and again it's a very general question just to start, very similar response really. How has this process affected how you're thinking about visitors, the site and your work? So this is very much less about the staff of the site but those people who are encountering it every day? How are you thinking about the engagement of the work?

R: That's quite a difficult question really. I mean, it's awful, I don't mean – I was about to say I don't really think about the audience and that sounds really bad to say I don't really think about the audience; but in truth, I don't – especially because again, what does that mean? I mean, there's multiple audiences. There's going to be loads of different types of people who come to that place for all sorts of different reasons. So that's why I can't – I can't think about audience because it would be daft of me to try and identify something that is an audience.

I don't really think about it. I just think I know that this work is there. I think of it in terms of like an encounter. That's how I like to think about producing work in landscape. It maybe goes back to just the things I was just talking about. You're in the landscape for whatever reason that you are there for, to have different kinds of experiences and this offers another encounter within that landscape. I would like to think that it can work on lots of different levels. That was part of that thing about having the children – the air holes low down so that the kids could look in. I was thinking about audience very specifically in relation to that. That was about young, small people and their ability to view it properly and have a more intimate engagement with it. That was really delightful actually, yesterday seeing kids doing that.

Actually, when we went early in the morning, we saw this handprint – that was really lovely, this tiny little child's handprint on the box outside just near one of the viewing holes. I don't know how the print was left but Andrew was suggesting it might be some cream or something, a slightly greasy little mark or maybe ice cream or something. I don't know but it was really, really poignant because it was like, oh bingo, that's it! That's what I wanted it to do and then you've got the visual evidence that someone's doing it. Even when we went down last night before I

Mapping Contemporary Art in the Heritage Experience – Artists' Interviews

gave the talk, some kids were down there before us and they were all looking in. So in terms of that engagement as an audience, that was really great.

Then the other thing that happened, for example, last night is I did talk to a couple who had said that they'd come down on Wednesday to Gibside and they started by telling me that they weren't arty or didn't know anything about art and that they were walkers. They'd come on Wednesday and obviously encountered this thing in the landscape and they were both quite honest and said, well, we thought what's this, why is this here – in that accent, being a bit nonplussed about the whole thing. Perhaps because it was Wednesday there were no leaflets or anything about it so they really were a bit bemused about what this thing was and why it was there. But they'd spoken to someone in the café about it and they'd said, oh you should come back on Friday because there's an opening on Friday evening.

Anyway, they'd come back. They'd made the effort to come back. They'd come down the path and heard me do my little speech or whatever and then they both came over and they were so lovely and generous. They said, "Oh it was so great to hear you talk about it and now we understand what it's about and we think it's fantastic. We love it. We love it." The man was taking photographs. They said, "Oh it makes such a difference to have that, the background to it." So I do realise that's important, that sense of – there's got to be some help to navigate this stuff and that's one thing I do think about in relation to audiences. I'm not someone who thinks you shouldn't tell.

That's why last night I gave quite a comprehensive sort of story of what the project was about because I think, yes you can leave it up to people to imagine, but I think actually this story is important. So it needs to be told.

I2: That's interesting. What about interpretation then because at the moment there's nothing next to the work that actually does that?

R: Yeah. That's okay. I think that's okay and I don't necessarily want that very direct here it is kind of thing. I think the leaflet that's been produced is fine. That gives enough and that's at the entrance way when you come in and it's in the café. There's plenty of opportunities to pick up a leaflet. So I think that's fine, but I think the fact that there is a leaflet that gives a bit more is important. Yeah.

I1: This is just an extra question because in many ways we've probably finished the specific questions, which is fine, it doesn't have to be longer than it needs to be. I'm curious about – because I'm curious about what you said yesterday in the meeting about it being a temporary intervention, would you be thinking very differently about it if it was permanent? I know there's all sorts of multiple things that that brings in, but I'm just thinking about the idea of that being permanent or something being permanent and then how might you think about audience? Would that change a lot? I don't really know what I'm trying to get at there, but the difference between permanent and temporary artwork?

R: It's really hard to answer because I've never produced a permanent piece. Well, other than in my studio perhaps in terms of, if you like, my objects, my painted

Mapping Contemporary Art in the Heritage Experience – Artists' Interviews

pieces or the work that I do that is more studio based for exhibition and then perhaps gets sold or goes into collection. I mean, that's permanent, but you know, that's obviously a different thing than producing these kind of projects. So it is actually really quite hard to answer that question in terms of how it might impact on my thinking about it.

I mean, obviously on a practical level it impacts significantly because the thing has to be able to exist for a long time. So it would have to be constructed differently and the materials would have to be different and that might, you know, in this project, I couldn't have produced that piece of work as a permanent piece of work, I don't think – given that the plants, for example, I couldn't guarantee that they would – I mean it depends what permanent means as well. Often that can be defined as a twenty-year period or a fifty-year period or a one-hundred-year period – so you'd need to be much more clear – well, not you, the commissioner would need to be much more clear about what permanence means.

I2: Is your Kielder piece still there?

R: It is, but that was only a temporary piece but they decided because of the way it had been constructed it definitely had more longevity than six months, so they would just leave it up until it couldn't be left up anymore. I mean, we assumed a tree would fall on it because it's in the middle of a forest, but Peter was saying last night it's still there.

I1: I like that drawing on Park Row in Leeds that was a six-month project and seven/eight years later it's still there and nobody has graffitied on it yet.

I2: What do you feel about that? Do you feel that's okay?

I1: Yeah, I think it's completely fine. It has got marks on it that affect it, but it's not – but I suppose what I was thinking about is – what occurs to me is, might I have to look differently about what the work was doing if I knew it was permanent possibly? So I suppose in this instance, I suppose what I'm actually ironically by asking about permanence, what does the freedom of the ephemerality allow us to do in a heritage environment? What does that enable us to do in terms of interpretation, in terms of audience?

R: Yeah.

I1: What is the magic of that ephemerality that is very different from how something might be if it is a permanent piece of interpretation?

R: I think that is a really important question and I think in a way maybe I'm almost realising that I'm not so interested in permanent commissions as well. I think maybe that's the other side to this. I think that, you know, a permanent commission really gets into the territory of public art in the sense that you are actually – it's a sense of something that's there forever and it's kind of – I think that's less interesting, certainly from this perspective of engaging with history and engaging with heritage because I think the whole point – in a way it would be to go against precisely what we've spoken about in terms of this multiple layering of histories; and also how things come to the foreground at different times, or things

Mapping Contemporary Art in the Heritage Experience – Artists' Interviews

are reassessed at different times, or re-evaluated and certain kinds of histories are revisited at certain points – the interest of that; the relevance of that from a contemporary perspective how it activates the present. I think that if you then get into putting something in there that's then meant to just be there forever or as long as forever could be, it completely changes that. So it's about that 'staticness' again. I think that that is off-putting to me.

I don't think I'm so interested in producing public art in that kind of way – certainly not in these kind of environments, a landscape type of environment. It might be different maybe in an urban environment. I don't know. I'd have to think about it. I've not been presented with that opportunity. But I think in relation to all of these things, the ephemerality of it, I think is super significant because it's the shortness of the time of it adds to the poetics of it. It's that thing of it's there. It activates that landscape, or hopefully activates that landscape in a certain kind of way in relation to certain stories for a limited period of time and then it's gone. And then it's just become another part of that layering of that site and that history.

I1: That's really interesting because, for me, that is precisely, I think, what the heritage industry, however you might want to think about it, is realising in some way that it can't do – I don't know why I'm personifying it in this way, but there's this sense of heritage being this fixed thing that is this landscape is fixed, it looks like this, we are maintaining it in this very particular way and that's what you've just articulated is precisely the kind of opposite of this idea of activating this in the present. That's really fascinating.

I2: Yeah, it is. It is.

I1: And I think that's what this project is about.

I2: Absolutely. Absolutely.

R: I think this one for me, I mean this is the biggest one I've done in terms of scale and budget and time and everything and it's followed now an eight-year prior history of doing some in the lead up to this. So this one for me is the one that's really kind of crystallised that. I suppose it's obviously been going on in my head, but again that's what great about this process, you've just drawn that out but clearly, I've been thinking about that, I think, that sense of ephemeral... yeah. And it was crystallised yesterday with the idea of the exhibition and could this be moved somewhere else and how I felt very resistant to that because all of the stuff we've been talking about. The poetics of the space and the poignancy of it and in relation to that story – it's completely negated if it's put somewhere else. Even though it can exist as a sculpture. I appreciate that, it's an object that can be viewed aesthetically as a complete work and it could be put anywhere. It could be put in a gallery. I could see it sitting in the city centre or whatever and functioning as a piece of work, but it's not the point of it and it would be a different thing if that happened to it.

I1: It's an interesting thing – I mean, we could talk about that another time, maybe in the next interview about that because I think those discussions yesterday about taking that piece of work that has been reflected on a

creative net and putting it into another...you were particularly resistant to that. Mark, I thought, was going to be really resistant, didn't seem to be that much and Mark was quite interested in it. So that's a really interesting area. I am aware that you will have to catch a train. I've suddenly went, oh. So we ought to...

I think we are done. So shall we officially declare, thank you and that was fantastic.

[End of Recording]