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KEY:

Cannot decipher = (unclear + time code)

Sounds like = [s.l + time code]

I: = Interviewer

R: = Respondent

I: So, interview with Fiona Curran at the Royal College of Art, April the 26th, 2019. Third and final interview with Judith King and Nick Cass.

I: Okay. So, I don't know where... yeah, where should we start? The thing right at the beginning was fascinating. And I don't necessarily want to start there, but I was really struck in our very first interview with you, how the whole kind of question of heritage was like, "Wow, we know we can't kind of do that." So, that has often sort of stayed in my mind through this process. So, I kind of maybe want to come back to that. But maybe it's worth starting with a practical process because from previous interviews we talked a lot about how that kind of commissioning happened, your experiences of it. And it might be just worth to reflect, starting with that and reflecting on that now. So, looking back. Is there anything that is in your mind particularly about that? How have you thought about that kind of practically? Are there obvious things that we ought to be thinking about? That was really vague, wasn't it? But –

R: [Laughter]. It's all right, don't worry. I think it's funny, because, obviously, in a way you don't, necessarily, really sit down and absolutely kind of... well, I don't analyse what's happened in incidents. So, it's quite weird when you're suddenly asked to kind of... okay, this is what happened, practically and how's that impacting how you're going to do the next thing, if you're going to do the next thing? And it's not really that I've consciously thought about that. But I do think, maybe, in the back of my mind there are things that... for example, I have applied for something recently, which I have now been short listed for. And in my mind, when I was applying for that project was, don't be overly ambitious. I don't mean in terms of the type of work that you want to make, but in terms of my actual involvement of the production and making of that work. Because I do think that probably what has come out of the last project for me as brilliant as it was. And there's loads of positives. But I think the negative that came out of it was how tough it was, actually, physically. And we did speak about that a lot in the last interview. So, we've kind of reiterated. But I do think that, that impact on me physically and mentally at that point was just too much.

So, I do think going into anything now in the future, I have got that in the back of my mind, even if I haven't consciously sort of decided that. I think there is

something there that's making me think, okay. If you want that level of ambition then the budget has to be big enough for you to be able to just kind of outsource and be much less hands-on. Or if you really want the hands-on involvement with is something, I'm really interested in, then you just have to think differently about where you deliver it and maybe the timeframe therefore has to be longer in terms of the delivery. There's various things like that that would need to be thought through, I think. So, I think maybe in terms of the project that's quite interesting from the commissioners perspective is those timeframes, those budgets. How time and money are allocated, where the support is for artists to enable for them to be involved very closely and directly, but at the same time not overburdened with that kind of involvement, I think. So, yeah, I think that's what I was... that's what I wanted to...

I: Yeah. That's really interesting, isn't it, because I think the fact that that's still there in your mind, even though we did talk about it last time and really thought that's still is important. And that may well substantially change how you think about making... how –

R: Sorry. [Laughter].

I: And the implications [background noise 0:04:14:9] scale of the project that you're interested in going for or in the sense of how this might implicate the (unclear 0:04:20:6). I mean, I think I still have, and I don't know – I won't speak for you, Judith – but I think I still reflected a lot on your project in particular in the sense of its relationship with the site and how the thing happened and the important practical aspects of learning that have gone through that. So, it's really interesting that that has impacted on you. And that may well be a very positive thing because that may well have opened up other ways of working. I mean, do you think it will in that sense?

R: Yeah. I mean, I think it will because, yes, absolutely, it's a change, isn't it? I mean that commission was a step up for me in terms of the budget, from what I've done previously, and what I realise previously. So, of course, every time it steps up, your ambition steps up. Well, maybe it doesn't with everybody, but for me it has been the case that your ambition in the sense of the type of project you want to realise or you could realise. So, you want to kind of stretch to that challenge and think, "Oh, what could I do? This is great because I've got this opportunity." But at the same time, I think it's just that sense of keeping yourself in check to go, "Look, what's realistic here?" You might have these great wild ideas or grand ideas but can that, actually, realistically be delivered within this budget and this time frame with minimum support? And if it can't, you just have to shift your thinking a bit and do it differently.

I mean, I know one of the particular things about that project, where the support that I thought I was going to get didn't materialise and I probably would have put that in place if I had known, etc. So, I'm not going back over that ground. I know that things happened that were just slightly unfortunate in terms of that experience. But that is part of that learning experience, isn't it? It's like knowing that I would not put myself in that position of depending on other people in that way. I would, absolutely, make sure that I had the people in place that I needed to support me.

I: It's very interesting, actually, because that experience, that you had at Gibside has actually had an impact I think on all of us, on every aspect of the commission because we are now thinking about the support that needs to

be in. And one thing that you said in your interview, which has struck me actually... which was that the volunteers didn't really know what an artist did or how an artist worked. And that has really stuck with me. And I think will probably have an impact on my thinking... certainly, about how the Heritage Centre needs to have more understanding of how an artist actually... the practice of how an artist works.

So, I think those were the key things in your commission that, actually, have had quite a big influence, quite a profound influence on the way that different aspects, the artist has changed. You've changed your thinking. I've changed my thinking. And I think the thing about budgets... so we've all... that was quite key, painful though it was, it's probably had a good effect on all our thinking. But that's interesting what you say about ambition and a bigger budget, sort of, you increasing your ambition because that is an obvious. You think, yeah, that would obviously happen. But as you said it's actually, maybe you've called that into question.

R: Yeah. I think so yeah. I mean, because I think also, particularly, with maybe the type of commissions I've done up to this point tend to be these fairly large outdoor commissions. So, there is always this sense of the scale increasing with the budget. But, of course, that's ridiculous in a way, it doesn't have to. But it's not something that you consciously think of. It just becomes a sort of part of the, "Oh, for this kind of money I could make it this big." Then that's going to have more impact, particularly, in that landscape. I mean, I did think about that a lot in relation to where I wanted it sited next to the Orangery. And the views and perspectives of it coming from these different walkways and everything. There was something really important about the scale of that within that setting, that you wanted to go as big as you could really within that context, within the limits. So, I wouldn't have wanted to compromise that.

But, obviously, it just depends on the type of work that you're going to produce. And I just have to really reflect on the type of work I wanted to produce. And I've done what, three or four of these now, so it's like, doesn't mean I'm going to just keep making these, kind of, quite large-scale architectural pieces even though that's what I'd done up until this point. Maybe that's what's interesting, is the next one might be a complete change. And my thinking doesn't immediately go to that outcome. I think we talked about it a little bit in the last interviews about, it's almost funny how for me, as an artist I didn't set out to kind of become this person who did this type of work. And it's like now, over the last ten years there are a few of these. Suddenly I am positioning in that arena if you like, of someone who can go for these commissions because I now have some behind me.

So, it's quite a strange process that you... I didn't set out for it as an artist, but suddenly I'm there. So, there really is that questioning of what does this mean? And what does this mean for my practice? And do I want to do these things? And if I do want to continue to do these commissions and then possibly more like permanent commissions because, obviously, everything I've done up to this point has been temporary commission, what type of work do I want to make? And it's up to me to really think that through, sort of thing.

I: **What do you think about places within a historic context now? Does that feature largely in your thinking? Are you feeling comfortable in that sort of arena?**

R: Yeah. I think so. Absolutely. And also, I think for me because so much of my PhD research was about this idea of situated practice. And the use of that term for me was very much about that idea of understanding of a kind of an embedded knowledge of place. So, that theoretical research, that was carrying on from sort of 2010 to 2016, was side by side with doing these series of different commissions.

So, I think from that most recent commission, which was a post PhD, I think for me, it's really consolidated that, absolutely. Yeah, the historic sites, the historic locations are really fundamental and also fantastic in terms of an opportunity to engage with history in that sense and hidden histories and untold histories. I think there's something so possibly kind of unique about those particular places that really, they're so rich I think for artists. Well, for me, particularly, they're really, really enrich an artist to bring that kind of body of knowledge that you have but to spark a whole new kind of line of enquiry and line of research.

I mean, in all of that research that I did for the project around women in botany, it's just so fantastic. And it has now really taken on a life of its own in terms of my thinking and the studio practice and how it then kind of pushes outwards and connects up with other research. I think it was really brilliant to have that very specific story from that site, emerging from that site. Yeah. So, definitely. And I can feel a kind of hunger for that as well. It's not like I need those external... I've given a few artists talks recently, and I think that was a question that came up when somebody said, "Oh, do you think you need these sites in order to kind of (unclear 0:12:49:2)?" I said, "Well, I wouldn't put it like... I don't need them because I have kind of a body of knowledge and a body of interest that sustain me. But what's really interesting is, when you engage with these places and then you open yourself up to whatever histories they contain, then that effects the knowledge that you've got. And there's this lovely kind of enriching of that."

I: In this interview you talk about what body of knowledge you have that sustains you and how you open yourself up to a particular site in some way to your creative practice. And in terms of the commissioning process, we were talking largely, initially, around practical aspects of how that was managed. One thing I'm really interested in, in particular, is the sense of what it is that people perceive the role of the artist as being? What is it that they bring or what are the expectations that mean the historic site open themselves up to you? There's a sense of the artist being interested in their practice, but I think something is very different a site opening themselves up to you as an artist. Why do you think they do that? And I don't, necessarily, mean just for a very particular commission, but there's something about what people expect artists can do, which is very particular. And I'm just curious about whether you have any thoughts about that.

R: Well, actually that is something I've been thinking about recently, but not quite as specifically, obviously, as your question. But I was reading something last week that was about this idea of how important story telling is, and that the whole notion of storytelling as being something that opens us up to other ways of thinking and kind of makes us engage with the world creatively. And I sort of feel that in a way, part of what we do as artists is we bring these different, sort of, stories... or we uncover stories. We might bring stories. We might invent stories. But sometimes perhaps we're just revealing them and uncovering them in some kind of way. And I wonder if... it's not like commissioners are necessarily set out to do that consciously with an agenda of (unclear 0:15:02). But I do think it's like they want you to come and see something maybe that they don't see or to discover or to find... or just to reveal something maybe in some way about those places that they

have this incredible investment in. And I think that perhaps they hope that through doing that you're opening visitors' eyes to a different experience as well.

So that there is this opportunity for... and creative people across the board, it might actually mean the storytellers, fiction writers or something. It's not, necessarily, just kind of visual artists, maybe, who do that. But I do think it's that kind of creative sort of voice that can come to a place and cuts through perhaps many of the kind of restrictions or the agendas that those places have in terms of that day to day running that they have to do, visitor numbers, and meeting targets. This is the world we live in. We know it from education. It's tough. And it's really hard in your day to day stuff to remember this other level of creativity that can just open that thinking up to the different kind of space. And I think that those, sort of, environments, those heritage type places, maybe that's what artists can enable, is to just to bring this kind of sense of a different perspective, a different viewpoint, a different story, maybe.

- I: Yeah. So, one of the reasons that I asked that was partly because of the event (unclear 0:16:26:3-0:16:27:3) institute, which was this art and science correlation. And there was a (unclear 0:16:23:3-0:16:337) and (unclear 0:16:35:9) why is it the scientists want to collaborate with artists? Kind of made me reflect a lot on this conversation that we were (unclear 0:16:44:0) the complete talks about... there was an oceanographer who was saying, "I'm (unclear 0:16:48:6) data about the temperature flows in the sea." But an artist is able to... and they have very specific reasons for why they wanted to work with artists and collaborate. So, I was thinking in a sense it's exactly the same situation. It's around what an artist brings and that sense of storytelling is kind of really interesting.**
- I: It is very interesting because the museum curators in the meeting for the programme say that. They say we get fixated on facts, absolute facts, and they get very upset when it's not accurate, and things are not accurate. And so, we have to learn to sort of let go a little bit about that. It's very...**
- R: Well, exactly. Especially, again, with heritage sites, there are these, kind of, tried and tested historical narratives. I mean, that's it. They're sort of factual. So, called factual. But as we know, history is a matter of interpretation. So, I think that's what's interesting, that as an artist you come along, you're not bound by that kind of factual thing at all. I mean, you're kind of completely free to respond in any way, within reason, obviously, don't want to offend people. But it's that sense of, you're free to come in and play with the facts in some way or sort of... a bit like the thing I did at Gibside, is that, almost treating it as a science fiction. It was like this alternative reality that could have been if things had been different. So, just going in and asking that, well, what if she hadn't been restricted or this awful thing hadn't happened to her? And just this kind of flight of imagination of just this space of possibility. And I think that's that thing of that kind of the fabulation or what the storytelling aspect of it is that opening a space, a different kind of space, as I suppose a possibility I would say.**
- I: And that's interesting again, because coming back to the conversation last night, was a sense that artists are enabling people to see possible futures. Which is really fascinating because one of the research themes for heritage is heritage futures. So, that's really interesting.**
- I: It would be interesting to ask because we haven't done the final interviews with Gibside yet, as to whether they felt the storytelling... because they were**

very specific about the brief... the artist brief was very specific in a way. And whether they felt the storytelling... how they reflected on what they felt that they thought that they were going to get by doing that. It would be interesting to see what they say.

I: Yeah, yeah, absolutely. Can I just... again, this is not necessarily going of (unclear 0:19:55:2) just picking up on something that you said, that I was interested in. You talked about this idea of situated practice and embodied sort of knowledge of place. And who do you think... who's that knowledge is embedded in? And also, is it enriched in... I suppose it's not necessarily a question about audience seeing. But I'm just sort of... there's an overlap somehow between perhaps one way to kind of think about engagement with a place, community, who lives and understands a place, and then the sense of just an idea of who their audience is. I'm just... oh, I don't know what the question is –

R: No. I think I understand what you're trying to ask me. And I would say... I think I might have mentioned this before actually. But one of the things I'm really intrigued by is this idea of the landscape, the place itself having a knowledge. So, first and foremost, maybe there is this sense of not going in and overlooking, actually, that environment itself. The landscape as a kind of character here or protagonist if you like in this story because that's the constant. All the people that we're talking about in terms of humans coming and going. Mary Eleanor was several hundred years ago. So, if we start talking about people, we're only talking about living memory of people now. But that landscape, that place, even that building you are showing outlives all of that understanding, all of that embodied knowledge kind of thing.

So, for me, I think... and again, that's probably something that came from my PhD research and the things I'm interested in to do with ecology and the environment and trying to think beyond the human perspective. But, for me, it's that sort of sense of embodiment goes way beyond the human embodiment. It's a planetary body or an earth body. There's other things. There's the plants and all the plants she collected and the seeds. And all that sort of legacy of that plant collecting and everything, that you could say is a kind of embodied and embedded knowledge within our landscapes now. So, I think that would be the starting point. And then, yes, when you then start, sort of, accelerating up to the present, you've got the embodied knowledge and the experiences of all the people who are actually engaging with those places. And that includes the staff and the visitors and the artists and everyone who's kind of got an investment in the place or is in some way experiencing it. But I think it's those longer histories that go beyond our timeframes that really intrigue me.

I: So, in a way your work's about time?

R: I think a big chunk of it is, yeah. But without being kind of time-based in terms of a practice, it definitely, I think, references, yeah, some of that. Even if you think about the Wardian case and my simple question, that you caught on the film that was made about me saying how part of the things started me thinking for the commissioners, started for me going, "How did they get the plants back?" Because it took ages. And it was that simple question of, I'm thinking of her sponsoring this trip and then reading about plant collecting and then there's this missing bit of knowledge where I'm thinking, "But, yeah, how did they get them back?" As a novice gardener I'm thinking, they've got to travel months and months aboard a ship and again, those, what ifs?

I think it's that thing, the artist asking those questions that perhaps are really either completely obvious to someone else, who is maybe a scientist or a botanist would probably just not even go there because it's just so fundamental or wouldn't even occur to someone. But it was just the asking of that. And that was a time thing of how did they get from there to there and could still have the plants alive at the end of the journey. And just that curiosity of that led me to then googling kind of plant transportation boxes. And then suddenly you get this whole new world opening up of these beautiful objects that look like sculptures, houses, and architectural forms and then suddenly as an artist, visually then you're intrigued and this new... yeah, a rather new visual enquiry. Yeah.

I: So, there's a whole revealing of knowledge also, to the audience that's looking at it. Your right, I didn't know about Wardian cases either, so it was just like, "Wow, really?" Those are really good. How clever. And I'm thinking oh, my God. And they're contemporary as well.

R: Well, yeah, exactly. And then that whole thing about them still being used up to the '60s with airfreight and they were only replaced after that because... sorry, with sea freight and only replaced after that because of air freight, which speeds everything up. So, then that's a question about technology and the time and speeding everything up and, yeah. And how they revolutionised not just plant transportation but then also economics because you can smuggle tea from China to India and start plantations with it, which they couldn't do. They've been trying for years to smuggle this tea out of China, the British, and they couldn't because the plants kept dying in transit. And the Wardian case was the thing that cracked it.

So, even this tiny... I think there was a thing, wasn't there, on the radio about the hundred most significant objects that changed the world or something like that. I'm not sure if the Wardian case was one of them. But it probably should have been if it wasn't. It's that kind of thing. It's like from the simple asking of that curiosity of a question you get this whole chain of like, wow, this isn't really made to... kind of planet changing object.

I: Actually, wasn't it somebody called Ward?

R: Ward, yeah, Doctor Ward. He was a doctor in East London, and he lived in a really impoverished part of East London with terrible pollution, and discovered it by accident through growing, think it was ferns. I can't remember what he was growing. He was growing something and then constructed something under glass. And then observed the fact that it became self-feeding and self-regulating because of the evaporation of the water and then the water stayed within the case because of the glass and then re-watered itself, kind of thing. So, it was a sort of a chance discovery from growing something on the window ledge.

I: Oh awesome. See, I didn't ask that. That's quite interesting, isn't it. Okay. I want to go back to the... maybe we should keep reflecting back because I kind of want to ask a question, which is in my head at the moment. Which is about the gallery thing. Which I'm quite interested in. But maybe that's at the end of the interview. Do we need to keep reflecting back on...? I think you've answered the question about the impact that this has had on your practice. And the questioning that this has had on your practice as well, especially as you say the architectural sort of features and whether you still want to keep... sort of, be commissioned or being thought of as an artist that could perhaps make architectural features, which has sort of grown. So, that's

reflected back. Have you got anymore... are there any more reflections that you've got about how it could have done... how we could have done it better? That's grammatically not right, but you know what I mean. With the commissioning process, with distance now, are there things that...

R: I don't think so. I think we did talk about that a little bit last time.

I: **Yeah, we did.**

R: The only thing I can remember that felt a bit uneasy was that site visit, where we all had to come on the site visit together. That's the only bit that would say probably could have been done differently. But I totally appreciate in terms of practicality that I don't know how you'd do that unless you just did it as timed things throughout the day, so. But, yeah, that was the only kind of awkward part of it, I think. There wasn't really anything else that I think could have been done differently. I think it was all pretty straight forward and quite clear.

I: **We probably covered that in the last one.**

R: Yeah. I think that's the only thing I can think of though. I mean, I suppose maybe the other thing... again, I might have mentioned this last time, was about the budgeting. Again, I'm going through that again now with this new application, is this idea that you've got to have these budgets in advance. And I get it. I understand you've got to explain how you're going to spend the money or where it's going to be allocated. Also, I suppose, to give the commissioners confidence that you can deliver, etc. But it's so difficult when you don't know what the outcome is. Unless you know exactly what you want to do and you can really start getting costing, I think it's really hard.

So, I would say, in terms of the commissioning process, I don't know how you get that. I don't know how you can ask for a budget because you need that sort of confidence. But at the same time, not ask for a budget so the artist doesn't feel like they have to sort of pin things down to early. Again, I suppose that depends on the different types of commission you might be being involved in, whether there is a longer research period and whether they want a clearly defined outcome at the point they commission you, or whether they are open to it evolving and changing. And all those things come into play don't they. But I do think the budget... it's funny how you can... again it's just another one of those fairly clear statistical kind of markers like, "Right, we need a clear budget. A clear budget and a breakdown." But actually, it doesn't always think with the way artists think, to be able to have to box that off.

I: **I mean, would it have been better if the project had... if there was at the point where the artist was appointed, that there was a research period because it was almost as if the expressions of interest required that the research you did was to produce an expression of interest. Whereas if there was somehow... if the selection process was not to do with the site itself but was to do with the artist and then enable them to have a six-month research period. Is that just a different model or is it a better version of kind of what happened?**

R: Well, I think it's a different model. And I would say that perhaps the drawback of a model like that is your already excluding artists who haven't maybe already done this kind of thing before. So, where do they every get the opportunity? Where do they ever get a foot in to kind of do something like this? Whereas the expression

of interest at least opens up that surprise application, maybe from people who maybe don't have a track record in that particular way of working that can just spark your curiosity as commissioners to then give them at least the benefit of the doubt to get through the next stage. So, I wouldn't want to shut that down because it's something I talk a lot to my students about, this (unclear 0:31:19:0) and everything. How do you get these commissions when you haven't done one?

And it's always that sort of... so, I do think that the expression of interest period thing is a good process really. As much as it is difficult because I do think if your really interested in it, you would already have done quite a bit of research to put in the expression of interest. Although actually, to be fair, the ones for this project were really sort, weren't they? The initial post, they were super short.

I: Yes, they were.

R: Like 300-words or something. I didn't require a huge amount. I mean, the one I've just done, for example, was two pages.

I: Two pages, yeah, I know. I think actually... note to self.

I: I think that is an interesting point, though, which is something I've reflected on quite a bit, is the sense of... and it's not, necessarily, to do with an emerging artist or an... who's had experience with these commissions. But actually, it's asking somebody who maybe wouldn't even think of positioning themselves in historic context, to ask them to do that, specifically to see what would happen, as a very kind of productive challenge. And it goes back to my argument about the Brontes. Their contemporary arts programme, 99% of those people were interested in the Brontes. But I think actually maybe you should commission that (unclear 0:32:45:2). Never heard of them. Never read them. Never (unclear 0:32:46:2). That would actually do more to challenge or perpetuate the legacy or you know –

R: Yes, yeah. No, that's a really nice. But then like you said maybe that's just a different type of commission that's a bit more experimental as a commissioning process or something that's likely to deliver specifically a (unclear 0:33:05:7) targeting.

I: Yes. Whose practice is completely, absolutely, not going to work with that... yeah, that would be really interesting actually. Next. [laughter]. Should we get onto the gallery?

R: Yeah, sure.

I: Let's think about that because, obviously, now we're going to be showing most of the work that happened through this project into a gallery situation. And how does that change its meaning or how does the audience receive it? But you have chosen... well, practical reasons, the Wardian case was too big to get... although, I wonder if we could have done it somehow.

R: Well, there was a suggestion it could have been outside, but as you know it wasn't just practical for me, it was also –

I: Yes. So, I'd like you to sort of talk about that and a bit more about why you were very clear that actually this was a different body of work.

R: Yeah. I mean, I think I meant to go back to that idea that the site and the situated practice and that that project was absolutely conceived in relation to that place and the history of that place. And then, specifically, conceived to go next to the Orangery. So, for me it wasn't a sculptural object as a stand-alone object. It was a site specific, or site related piece of work. So, to suddenly take that down and put it somewhere else, even with the benefit of text panels and the broader research project which could have at least kind of contextualised it, I still felt deeply uneasy about that.

I mean, for a start it definitely wouldn't have been in a landscape environment. It would have been in the urban space outside the gallery or within the gallery itself, inside the gallery. So, that would not have made the... and it just, yeah... it just wouldn't have made any sense in relation to plants, botanical culture, plant collecting the Wardian case, etc, etc. It would have just completely changed the experience of the work. So, I just felt, yeah... I felt really uncomfortable about that.

And also, in terms of making... so, the decision was already made in a way that, that wasn't going to be a viable option for me. So, then the option was there for me to produce new work. Or I could have just said, you can show photographs or something and contextualise it that way. But, obviously, I wanted to do something that in away that's part of my own practice, which is always this movement between those exterior spaces and then the interior space of the studio and how I maintain those type of practice.

I think we did talk about this last time, but that's something that's really clear to me again from having done this, that it's really important that I do maintain those and I don't just become an artist that does commissioned work. That it's really important that I maintain that balance. That I can do both commissioned work for specific sites and then having work that's generated entirely of itself within the context of the studio, that's, obviously, informed by all of that other experiences and all the research that comes with those experiences of doing commissioned work. But there is sort of a different type of work. And that is more object-based.

So, the work that I've been doing over the last year, has been completely informed by the research on the botanical culture and women in the botanical culture in the eighteenth century particularly. But it has a very different form. A different kind of output.

I: **Another kind of question has come into my head, and it's not necessarily related, but it's something... again, it's partly to do with the role of the artist and trying to get a sense of what you think that is, partly because I know it's something I've always been like, "Come on what is it? Or what am I as an artist?" So, fascinating. So, with your desire to maintain a studio practice, I kind of wanted to ask, about why did you become an artist? Did you have any sense of [laughter]...? This seems slightly random because –**

R: That's such a big question.

I: **And partly, I don't know whether it's to do with the sense of whether being an artist is a career, that something that one does as a job or whether it's something that is very much about... maybe it's kind of not related, but I'm just getting the process of what it is, that drives the making.**

R: Well, I've always described it as being something, you don't choose. It chooses you. And that for me it's, kind of, even from being really young. It's not like I've formulated some plan, "Oh, I'm going to be an artist." Or knew that that's what it was even called. I didn't have any signpost to it or anything from my background. So, it's nothing to do with that sense of a career kind of an option. It's just, I always loved making. I loved making. I loved colour. I loved fiddling about. I was always drawing. Always doing collages from a really young age. And I think that that stayed with me right through. And, obviously, you reach a certain point in your life where you think, "Oh, my God. This is an option career-wise." Probably not a wise option financially, but it's an option in terms of something. Some sort of way of working.

And I do think... I mean, I don't want to get into any kind of over-romanticised (unclear 0:38:51:8) because it's different for everybody. But for me, there is something about it. It's necessary, in terms of a kind of personal... like a sustaining, nurturing space. I don't really know how to pin it down. But you know there is something absolutely fundamental about it both in terms of physical and mental health. It's a sort of, it's something that isn't answerable to anybody else. I mean, yes, it becomes those through having to kind of put it into a career context. Of course, there's a point of which you have to professionalise it. But that's why there's something about that studio space for me, that represents something, that is beyond all of that. I mean, yes, I still have to find the money to pay for the studio, but once I'm there what I do there and what I produce there it's like it doesn't have to answer to anything or anyone if I don't want it to.

I: **And that's kind of why... I didn't know why I asked the question, but it's about because we've had this debate quite a few times in the past about who artists make work for. And it's not that we disagree about this. But we have lots of conversations. And I have often said my art practice is about my (unclear 0:40:10:3). And often I'm trying to problem-solve for myself. So, I always argue from the point of artists, that artists aren't necessarily making things for somebody. And Andrew Newman disagrees with this quite fundamentally. And I can see his perspective. So, I think that's the context of this question.**

I: **It's really interesting this area because there's a question I want to ask you, which is going to come out of that. But you know those workshops that I give, the ones to your students about what is an expression of interest, what is a proposal. So, it's a very practical. But the question that goes before that is, do you want people to see your work? It's actually, a very, very big question that sometimes it, sort of, just goes over their head. But the answer to that... so it gets onto my question of you. It, kind of, seems to me that what your saying is, my gallery space or my studio... no. My studio space is my private world. But my commissions are my public outward-facing. That's my face to the public.**

R: To some extent, but I don't think it's as clear cut as that because, obviously, the work I make in the studio does have a public... usually has public outcomes as well in terms of exhibition, for example. So, I don't think... so, I suppose I'm just trying to distinguish between that... once it goes public it's that more professional arena if you like. And there's something about the private space of the studio, which is the making space, which is potentially free of all of the things under considerations. Not always, it's entangled, of course, it's entangled, and that's why I'm saying I don't want to over romanticise this notion that artists are just in their studios creatively expressing themselves. The studio is not always a nurturing

space. Sometimes it's a really fraught kind of uncomfortable, difficult space, of course.

But I'm just trying to generalise for the purposes of the conversation to say that I do think that first and foremost perhaps to ask the big question, why are you an artist? I'm an artist because I find it an incredibly sustaining, rewarding, and nurturing place or thing to do. I think that it just... I think I would really struggle in the world if I didn't do it for (unclear 0:42:46:9). I think I would really. Yeah, I need that kind of opportunity to explore, to be curious, to tell stories even if I'm not telling them to anyone else, but just to... yeah, exploring them and testing things and trying things out. I think that's what it represents.

I: Yeah. I knew there was a reason to want to ask it because part of it is to do with that sense of audience and who do you make for. And I think often there is something a bit personal about that, before and with ideas of publicity in kind of what you do.

I: It's just fundamental because it keeps bouncing back as to why we wanted to do the artists interviews and that kind of... as a curator, I feel uncomfortable sometimes asking artists to be very specific about stories, because you're thinking that's... there's a tension within me as a go-between, between (unclear 0:44:00:2). I think it's because it's not that I'm an artist. It's not that I'm an artist. I'm a curator, so I kind of know, for me it's a very private world. My artistic practice is very private. I don't necessarily want anyone... I just do it for my mental health. So, this thing about asking artists to commission, to work it's a strange area really. It's a strange area. And it keeps sort of bumping up against a language, such as what is it? Is it an interpretation? What is it? And all of those sort of difficulties as well as what are we asking artists to do.

R: But I think the commission part of it is really interesting as a challenge because it brings you into that very public arena and in a way you know as an artist... well, I mean, I think you learn as an artist after you start doing a few of these, that it is a different type of practice. And it's not private and you can't kind of go into it hoping that you're going to keep hidden. I mean, okay, this one's been particularly exposing because it's, obviously, part of this bigger research project, so there's lots of discussion around it and talk about it. But even if this multilayer wasn't going on, there's still that sense that it's a very public arena. You kind of have to respect that, that you're entering into this situation.

I think that's where my thing about... we talked again about me doing temporary works rather than permanent works, I think that's another part of it as well for me, is that I'm not comfortable with the idea of doing permanent works. Well, not, necessarily, saying I'm ruling it out, but I think the nature of that type of work would be very different if it's going to be permanent rather than the temporary site-specific type things that I've done up to this point. And that's again, that sensitivity to that public space and that point of putting something into that space. And then be creating some discussions and stories, but at the same time not imposing that as this is it now, you've got to live with it sort of thing. But saying, well, it's going to be here just for a brief duration, and then it's going to go away again. And I think that that's interesting. I find that really interesting and intriguing as a challenge as an artist. I find that's why this whole arena of this type of heritage type of commissioning I think is really suited to my practice and way of thinking.

I: **But you're right, it's exposing. It does put you in quite a vulnerable position. You've got to be quite tough to do it.**

R: Yeah. I think so. [laughter].

I: **I wouldn't do it.**

R: No.

I: **Yeah. Okay. I think I've asked my questions about the gallery. I think you've been very clear about that, about those too.**

I: **So, then that's a big area to think where there is a sense of heritage. And I suppose the way to think about heritage as the places that we have worked in, in the project. The initial questions were about how heritage... how they're a role in your life either personally or professionally. So, talked a little bit about that. But I think one of the senses was... is that okay?**

I: **Okay. Has it stopped? It's not showing.**

I: **So, back up is okay. So that's still working. Is it worth starting that again, the...?**

R: Maybe, the batteries gone?

I: **It seems all right.**

I: **(Unclear 0:48:177). Recording. Okay.**

I: **Okay.**

R: All right.

I: **So, we're (unclear 0:48:27:2) did that. And where, was I?**

I: **Heritage.**

I: **So, the initial questions were about your engagement with heritage, and I think one of the senses of the project was, has your sense of the role of heritage maybe in contemporary society... has that changed? Have you thought about it differently? So, you talk about kind of a landscape, and then modern landscape and town and all that kind of bigger scale. There's a sense of heritage as being a very sanitised sort of commercial activity for public consumption, which is perhaps a service view of what the National Trust does, for example. So, have you got any sort of reflections on maybe that aspect of heritage now?**

R: I mean, again, I don't know if I should specifically sort of pinning it right down to that word if you like. But maybe I can just talk about some of the things that have been going on for me the last few months in terms of (unclear 0:49:34:5). So, there's a few things. One of which is that during, again, through the whole process of this project as you, now I moved house.

So, I moved house to Letchworth Gardens City, which is like a heritage site. The whole place is, basically, preserved as under the original principles of the Garden

City, which is both brilliant and amazing, but also a bit weird because it's got this slightly preserved kind of feeling about it. And a certain kind of resistance to any kind of alteration of that in terms of the way it looks. So, that's really made me think quite a bit about heritage in that context in terms of my own domestic house that I live in now, which is a grade two listed building. And the restrictions that are placed on that. And the idea of me coming in now as a custodian of that. You are inheriting in a sense a heritage. You're inheriting this architecture which you own but don't own kind of thing. Again, talking about the time thing, you're passing through. I mean that house is much older than my lifetime and hopefully will still be there to kind of pass on in the future.

Anyway, that's one way of thinking about it. I think the other thing is, thinking about things to do with that notion of inheritance, actually, in a much broader perspective, about the environment and ecology and what we're facing now as a race in terms of climate change. And that's something that I think about a lot in terms of the notion of heritage. So, what do we mean by heritage? Because if we're thinking about heritage now in terms of inheriting something... I saw something really interesting the other day that was about this idea of... I think it's a scientific term that's to do with something to do with the shifting baseline syndrome, which is basically to do with when they're marking things to do with, for example, I don't know. Let's say water levels or something in the landscape, water table levels or to do with bird migration, all these, kind of, things. What happens is the boundaries keep shifting. So, every time they're doing a new sort of survey on something they're going by the last point.

So, this idea of restoring something back to something it's like well if you're restoring something back to the levels the 1970s let's say hedgerows or something, it's completely different then if you went back another hundred-years from that. So, this idea of the shifting baseline of what is the norm on what's acceptable. So, I thought that was really interesting as a concept. And if you apply that concept to something like heritage, it's like well, what's the shifting baseline for heritage? What do we deem as something to be worthy of preserving or keeping? And at what point do we go back to it? And then, if you go further back, what are you trying to do? Are you trying to recreate a situation or are you trying to, kind of, preserve an essence of something or maintain an idea of something, rather than an actual physical thing?

So, I think there's all these, kind of, really interesting questions to be asked about the meaning of that tone of heritage and what it applies to in terms of a bigger picture. Again, I come back to this idea and maybe it's an academic way of thinking for me at the moment, but this idea of thinking beyond the human. And it's like what are we thinking about in terms of heritage, and what do we think is worth looking after or becoming custodians of or passing on as an inheritance. And I feel that it needs to be broader than –

I: So, do you think... I suppose that leads me to think that kind of to be provocative. The best thing the National Trust can do is bulldoze all its country houses, rewild a million acres of land. And that would have a massive impact on (unclear 0:53:24:6).

R: Well, I don't mean to bulldoze the houses.

I: I'm not saying that you are suggesting that they do that but –

R: But I do think that the rewilding thing could be really interesting. I mean, in a way, obviously. I wouldn't advocate going in and knocking down the houses and everything like that. But I do think that this notion of parts of the landscape being given over to nature without our interference and our management of it would be... [Someone enters room 0:53:50:5 – 0:53:56:0]. There's the idea that you would give... again, that idea of what's the landscape? What is the model of that landscape that is being presented to us as the model?

I: **So, I suppose, it's this sense of why are we preserving (unclear 0:54:18:6) landscapes to try and hold against nature. I think it's really quite fascinating. And I think they are quite fundamental questions. And I think museums are asking about why are we maintaining these millions of objects in cold storage. What are the environmental impacts of that? And it's really interesting how... so (unclear 0:54:46:9) of a landscape of how we're thinking about those things have shifted quite dramatically recently.**

R: But then it's really difficult because who then makes those decisions –

I: **Yes. It's about decision making.**

R: - about what's kept and what's lost, what's of value and what's not of value and we know that those tastes change, it's really complex, incredibly complex. But I suppose I just think that there's a much bigger picture to be looked at than just our heritage. I think for me, that sense of what that heritage and inheritance means is so much broader than just this human, kind of our lifetime or the last couple hundred years or so.

I: **That's really quite interesting.**

I: **It's about quarter past, isn't it, that we'll be going?**

I: **Yes.**

R: I'm just conscious that Mark might be waiting. Did he say he was coming at quarter past?

I: **Half one.**

R: Oh, half past, okay.

I: **So, we probably ought to ask, a sense of, is there anything that we've not covered that you – any comments that you want to make, we've not covered? Obviously, we need to sort of at least pass that.**

I: **Yes, absolutely, yes. Any reflections?**

I: **There, doesn't have to be.**

R: No, no, no. I'm just trying to think if there's anything. Just remind me, what were the categories? Did you go through all the categories?

I: **Yes. There's a sense of heritage understanding. There's the commissioning process. There's your creative practice. And I guess we haven't really talked... well, we talked about the idea of audience saying, who's your audience for the work? How do you think people want to engage with it? I**

think those were the main sort of categories, we have been thinking about. But I don't think we need to be too restrictive to those because this has been a much more of an open conversation really.

I: Do you worry about what the audience thinks about your work?

R: No, not really. [laughter].

I: Worry is the wrong... worrying is the wrong word. What's the word I'm looking for? It's not worried. Not even concern because that would suggest that they're not receiving it (unclear 0:57:17:6). Do you think about how they?

R: I don't really, no. I'm not really concerned about that. I think again it's that integrity to that work itself that you make it, and then you're interested in how people will engage with it. But I don't worry about that in the sense that some people are going to engage with it and be curious and ask questions and want to know more. And some people are just not going to be interested. And so, yeah, I think it's just... I think I'm just going to have to let these people through. Sorry.

I: It's all right. (Respondent leaves 0:57:50:9 – 0:58:18:4).

I: No, that's all right. Can I just ask you about that? Because again, this has just come back to a little bit about audience and partly Andrew Newman's thinking. And he's challenging me in ways. So, I'm not arguing against him. But he's helped me think. His argument might be your desire for an integrity of the work itself is actually to do with a sense of a professional body of work that has a professional audience, rather than you as an artist trying to solve questions for yourself as an integrity. Because we've had this conversation. And I think he would see that as a, yeah, you might not care about the National Trust audience, but you care about the professional audience. And that's why integrity of work is important to you.

R: Right. Okay. I don't think I would subscribe to that. I mean, again, I think it's a grey area. And I think, obviously, at a certain point in your career you're in a professional arena like with any job, and you're, obviously, thinking about how your work will be perceived in that and potentially engaged with. But that's not what for me anyway. Maybe different for other artists. But for me, that's not in any way what dictates that outcome of the work. It's absolutely about the kind of curiosity, pleasure, joy, opportunity of creating a piece of work. And again, if we're talking about the commissions with a budget at scale with a site and to be able to really push all of that, thinking and all of that ambition to produce something. And then, the audience part of it is absolutely secondary to that. I mean, it's almost like... I'm not saying I didn't think about it at all in a sense that... obviously, those thoughts drift in, in terms of sensitivity both to your professional audience and to the audience at Gibside for example. But I don't think that that in any way dictated the outcome of the work.

I: I think you created these little, small portholes that were for children to look at your work.

R: Yeah. But I didn't create those for children. They were part of the integrity of the Wardian case. And then, obviously, my thoughts went to, when this is scaled up to

a large architectural scale, what will these operate as? Because they're actually in the original object, they're air holes. So, obviously, in my mind and even with the little model that I made I was thinking, "Oh, okay, weirdly these are probably going to be about four foot of the ground. Maybe three and a half foot off the ground that's perfect for a child's height." And then the slats I was thinking they're going to be about five and a half foot, well that's just about okay for adult kind of peering in over the (unclear 1:00:58:9). Yeah, your mind then goes to how will this function in that space in the landscape and then how will people engage with it as an object or as a thing in the landscape? But it wasn't like I thought, "I'll put these holes in for children to look through." The holes were already part of the original design of the Wardian case, yeah.

I: That's interesting. That's an interesting question. It's an interesting question.

R: I'm sure it's different for different artists. Maybe there are some artists who are much more professionally motivated like that and who are really consciously thinking about that thing of, this is an opportunity to do this with this, my peers, or the critics or whatever. And I'm sure that there would be... and that's not necessarily a bad thing. It's just a different... I don't think... I'm not really in that arena anyway [laughter] quite honestly. They're not going to be coming out from the kind of galleries and art magazines and the duh, duh, duh –

I: So, there's a freedom in that?

R: Yeah. Maybe. I mean, who knows if I would think differently if I was in that cultural arena, perhaps I would feel more restricted or more self-conscious or something. I don't know. You'll have to come back to me in a few years if I have made it to that arena. [laughter].

I: So, you don't feel self-conscious?

R: No.

I: That's great. Okay. That's interesting. It's an interesting question.

I: It is. It is. Okay.

I: Okay.

I: That's it.

I: That's it.

R: All right.

I: Turn it off.

[End of Recording]