1525: Behind the Scenes Interviews

**Natelle Morgan-Brown**

What do you do at Nottingham Contemporary?

Hmm…sometimes I feel I do too much, other times I feel I don’t do enough but essentially, I sit within the Learning Team (sometimes known as the ‘engagement’ or ‘outreach’ teams in other museums and galleries) as the Communities Programmer and on paper the aims of my job role are about:

1. Developing strong relationships between NC and “diverse” communities in the city

2. Creating and managing a learning offer for people of all ages outside of formal education

3. Ensuring the gallery is accessible to all

When I tell people what I do (aka my elevator spiel) I talk about “working with lots of different people in lots of different ways…”. This is my way of saying I help to make our organisation known (i.e. who we are, where we are and what we do), I work to make our gallery welcoming and accesible (recognising and removing obstacles which might exclude people or limit their access to or engagement with us because of e.g. physical, financial, language, health or “class” restrictions) and I try to develop and deliver activities with/for people who belong to all communities (and none) which happen both inside and outside the gallery building. This can involve long term projects such as Imagine which was delivered across a few years in care local homes with older people, or it could be one-off creative activities such as workshops in the studio.

I try to keep abreast of whats happening locally to inform my planning to ensure activities are not only responsive but also proactive in responding to needs and wants of communities. I have been focusing on gaps in access for a little while meaning I’ve been working to program activities with/for older people, people of African, Caribbean, South and Southeast Asian heritage and/or people who have faced disadvantaged circumstances (e.g., ill mental health).

What are your day-to-day tasks? What does your average workday like?

Creating connections and maintaining local partnerships is a big part of my role so my email inbox is always stacked which means it’s my least preferred task but something which takes up quite a bit of my time if I let it! I manage a few budgets so trying to stay on top of finances is also another chunky chore. The majority of time is taken up planning activities and trying to identify or make opportunities to work with partners; partners might be other galleries/museums, community groups or other support organisations such as Nottingham Refugee Forum.

Other tasks include team meetings (every 4-14 days), ordering materials, planning with our Associate Artist team, working with marketing, booking spaces, reading and reflecting and taking action as part of our Inclusion Working Group.

I’m part time (3 days pw), as many people in the sector are, and pre-2020 I would often be ‘out and about’ having conversations, taking meetings or delivering creative activities. However, currently most days are spent doing all the above online with regular days working from home.

What experience got you your current position?

Growing up, much of my personal lived experience was intersectional (although I didn’t know it at the time and certainly didn’t have the vocabulary to name it as that) so I feel I was primed to see people and their circumstances from a young age. I went to a strict Catholic school got GCSE’s and attended college doing BTECs and BNDs in both Drama and Dance which included planning and facilitating creative sessions for school groups. I went to university (as the first in my immediate family to do so) where I studied for and achieved a BA in Contemporary, Performance and Live Art (shout out to Nott’m Trent!). I chose the course because I couldn’t afford to live away from home and being creative was something I was good at and enjoyed, however I realised after graduation this wouldn’t actually “qualify” me for anything, so I also spent some time volunteering in a gallery to try to work up some experience. After uni I worked in a call centre, saved up and travelled solo through South America for a few months. I have worked various jobs but spent quite a few years as a HR Advisor for an energy company whilst also working part time

(in the evenings/weekends) as a Youth Worker for the County Council. This led me into working as a Project Manager for the Council, in a museum, at NTU and with various youth charities.

What do you love about your job?

My favourite part of the job is the actual doing – creating spaces and activities which enable people to create, talk and ‘do’ together. I also enjoy the relative autonomy and that each day is different (anyone who has ever worked in a call centre environment will appreciate that!)

What aspect of your job came as the biggest surprise?

The things that consistently surprises me is how much we regularly achieve with the resources we have (limited funding, a static building, small team etc) but also how far there is to go in terms of institutional practices (e.g., who should and does have access to art and creativity).

What do you think needs to be tackled more within the arts?

A big question…from a strategic sector specific perspective, funding is an endemic issue. There isn’t enough of it, it’s often unsustainable and hard to access, and streams consistently change depending on who’s holding the purse strings.

How do you think galleries can help reach the democratisation of art?

Whoever has the money, has the power (for now). See above…?

What are you reading/listening/watching at the moment?

Great question…

It was difficult for me to read throughout the last 15 months because of concentration but I’ve been getting back into it with these books:

- Priya Parker (The Art of Gathering) – an analysis of where, when and how we gather as groups in community which includes some great tips about being effective, intentional and generous hosts when gathering your ‘tribes’.

- The Fear Fighters Manual (Luvie Ajayi Jones) – going a step further with ideas which seem inspired by imposter syndrome, this is a book about knowing who you are and imparts the confidence to do and say all those things which chime with your values in professional and personal spaces.

- Culture is Bad for You, The Purpose of Power and Why Women Are Blamed for Everything are also a few books which sit patiently waiting on my shelf

I listen to either radio 1xtra or Smooth FM (there is no in between), working to a playlist (lofi hip hop beats) or listening to one of many brilliant podcasts including:

- The Good Life Project (the host interviews professionals from all sectors about how they live and work towards a “good life”.)

- Say Your Mind (a no holds barred shouty sweary thoughts on race, popular culture and the arts industry)

- The Pineapple Project (a dive into different issues including sex, race and mental health from a brassy Australian woman’s perspective)

- The Baggage Reclaim Sessions (boundaries, expectations and mental health - it’s as if someone turned Erika Badu’s ‘Bag Lady’ into a full podcast!)

- How to Own the Room (a fab podcast about making, taking and giving space to women)

- A few other podcast mentions… (career related...) Professional Troublemaker, Postcards to The Future, Meet Me At The Museum, WTF Should I Do With My Life, Magic Lessons, Talk Art (and other general life related…) The Happiness Lab, Science Diction, Just One Thing, Evil Genius

I’ve been watching the Handmaids Tale, and This Is Us for what seems like forever and binged the following recommended shows through 2020:

- Unorthodox (a woman moves away from the religious community in which she was raised)

- The Big C (cancer is a b!tch)

- Diet Land (life as told by a woman trying to understand if the career she chose is health obsessed or fat phobic)

What is one piece of advice you would have given to your younger self when entering the world of work?

When in interviews, (ask interviewers if its ok to) write down the questions as they ask them. This not only gives you a second to take stock and breath, but also helps to keep you from going on a tangent when answering as you can note a few basic bullet points you want to share. As a bonus, you can also refer back to your notes to help you prep for future interviews.

But also…it’s ok for plans to change – side steps, volunteering, side hustles and ‘just for now’ jobs are all valid, as is making a considered decision to completely change direction if things aren’t working out for you.