1525: Behind the Scenes Conversations – Olivia Aherne

Introducing Behind the Scenes Conversations with 1525 collective at Nottingham Contemporary. 1525 collective is a group of 15 to 25 year-olds based at Nottingham Contemporary who meet weekly to discuss creative opportunities in and around Nottingham. One of our latest artistic endeavors has been creating this podcast for you at home. Here we interview members of staff at Nottingham Contemporary to discuss their roles, their responsibilities, their experiences, and their inspirations at the gallery.

If you've never heard or visited, Nottingham Contemporary before, or if you visit every other day, then this podcast is for you. So sit back, relax, and please enjoy Behind the Scenes Conversations with 1525 at Nottingham Contemporary.

1525: What do you do at Nottingham Contemporary? So like what's your role in the museum?

Olivia: So I am the assistant curator of exhibitions. I'm one of two. So Hannah is the other assistant curator. And I suppose we work together to develop, a program of exhibitions. And this can be anything from solo shows. So it, where it's just one artist in the gallery, and the whole gallery, or even more than one gallery is dedicated to their work, or it could be a sort of wider thematic group show which is where we tend to pick it's where you would have seen 'Grace Before Jones' or many of our other shows 'Still I Rise', for example, where we pick a sort of theme or a concept, and we then sort of make a selection of artworks that respond to that theme or that kind of speak directly to, to that provocation. So I develop those, those exhibitions sometimes include existing work. So works that artists have already made at some point in their career or in their practice.

Historical works - they might be selections from archives. And then there might also be new works. So part of what I do is work with artists. It's actually the part that I enjoy the most to support them to develop new works. The exhibitions that are actually in the galleries at the moment, if anyone's had a chance to see them, most of both, Alison and Mélanie's shows are all new works that were made specifically for Nottingham Contemporary.

So yeah, I worked directly with Mélanie to develop those and then Erika's show includes some new acts as well as existing. So yeah, it's my role to sort of work together with Hannah, the assistant curator, but also the chief curator and the director, Sam, on sort of researching planning, these shows, delivering them, so being onsite during install and working closely with the tech team to sort of bring them to life and everything that you've been discussing and planning over the last, sometimes 18 months to 2 years, you finally see coming to life in space and being built, but also performance. So something that we've been trying to do is sort of expand the, definition of exhibition because often or more so of the last 10 years, I think artists have started to work in sort of different ways, that open up or expand the idea of what an exhibition is and that tends to lean towards more performative practices. So artists that work in, in live performance or in text-based practices, or even with digital technology, which might lend itself better to a performance, or let's say a text commission or something that sits online. That's where I think collaboration tends to come in because we lead the work with public programs and research, or, with you Wingshan or with other colleagues in the learning department to sort of yeah, work together on projects.

And then the other thing is publications. So you'll see, in our shop, there are some publications which are directly linked to the exhibitions program and that tends to be something that we'll work on as a team to support the artist with kind of either publishing the first monograph or their first publication, or perhaps it's a catalogue that goes with a thematic show, but they're the kind of, yeah, the main responsibilities and things that I do as part of my role.

1525: Sounds super interesting. How do you pick a, like a theme in order to, well, for your exhibitions. Cause that's, that's so broad. Like I don't think I'd be able to, without losing focus, I wouldn't be able to choose something like that.

Olivia: It's a good question because I don't, I don't think there were any rules really. For me anyway, I think for, for everyone in the team, you know, it's about responding to sort of the urgencies of our time. So, you know, if, if it feels like there's a, an anniversary or say for the women's rights movements or something that feels particularly, pertinent and important to be recognizing or celebrating or reminiscing on, then, you know, you can respond to that. You naturally have those sort of, temporalities and anniversaries to play off. I think, you know, socio-political issues that are in the news play a big part in kind of what we respond to and the themes that we feel are important conversations to be had that we think audiences and visitors are engaging in and want to see sort of expanded and discussed and, spend time with. So it can be anything really from like the sort of heavier more political shows to things that feel slightly more, I guess, creative and conceptual. Yeah. It's a real range, and I think that's what's exciting is that you can really kind of take anything as a theme and run with it and, and find different ways to expand or bring in other conversations. So it's quite fluid.

1525: I saw that you were testing independent curator. So I was wondering what's the main difference between working independently as a curator and working with a gallery and what do you enjoy the most of each?

Olivia: Very different. It's very, very different. I think there are pros and cons to both. I mean, I say cons, but there's just differences really. And I think, working independently can be really, really difficult. If you don't have, you know, funding to do stuff you essentially, your whole role is fundraising, and for me anyway, that can really suck the fun out of projects, because the whole in the lead up to the project and from the point that you start to think about it and conceptualize it and develop it, often it's dependent on whether you get funding six months down the line. So, you know, you can put all of your energy and time into making this thing happen, which in some ways, are free. But, you know, if you don't get the funding six months down the line, then that project is essentially on hold and you have to wait until you find the funds from somewhere else, and that can be really, really frustrating, really difficult - it's really hard. I mean, I'm not going to sugar coat it. It's really hard to find space to put your projects on. I think there's been a real shift into online space because it's one that you can, you can make happen yourself. It's one that you can use these set up an online platform, a website, put together a kind of online exhibition, you know, teach yourself on to do these things for YouTube, and I think that's kind of really opened up opportunities. But it's really tricky, and I think something that feels I guess secure about working in an institution is that you have the space and, you know, you have some funding, I'd be lying if I said we don't fundraise on top and my time is spent fundraising as well. But you do have more time to spend talking to artists to doing some of the research to, you know, contributing to discussions on, on who gets platformed, who, would be interesting to invite, I suppose that they're the main differences. When you're independent, of course, it's all up to you and you get to do the things you really love and see your own vision and work with the artists you really want to, so there's a lot of freedom in that sense.

1525: What does your average day kind of look like, and what are your day-to-day tasks?

Olivia: It's really hard to work out what I do every day. I think I just spend a lot of time on email and I don't even realize it. So much of it is communications and just speaking to people and coordinating between so many different people. So if, for example, you're working in one exhibition, you might have, let's take 'Grace Before Jones,' for example. Over a hundred works from different artists, different museums, different galleries, different studios, a transportation company, an insurance company, an exhibition designer, new artists working on new commissions. Just like so many bodies and people, and you are essentially the sort of glue that holds all of those conversations together. So it's, it's your responsibility to, relay conversations. It's your responsibility to update people, to be in charge of the schedule, to make sure that certain conversations are happening at the right time to, you know, check budgets and make sure that you're not going over budget. They all feel like obvious things to say, but these are the things that really sort of take up my every day. And of course there's the, the part that I enjoy the most, which is when you actually get to sit down and have a studio visit with someone, But again, I would be lying if I said I do that every day, you know, so much of what I do is, is admin and, yeah, organizing and just making sure, essentially you are organizing an event, if you see it in those terms, and you have to make sure that everything will be there on that day, and everyone will be happy and, the vision of the artist or the curator, if you're working with an external curator, or the team, is the vision that they want to see and is the result that they want to see. A lot of conversations to be had, but when I, when I do have time, I do try and do studio visits with artists, that I, you know, I'm intrigued by and I want to know more about their work and that I'm excited by and try to see as many exhibitions as possible. So, it can be a range of things. I'm pretty sure I spend most of my time on my emails.

1525: What kind of happens at the studio visits? Like what do you speak to the artists about?

Olivia: That is such a good question because I left university, I left school, I had like my first few jobs and I still had no idea what I was meant to be doing at a studio visit. And it's one of those like unspoken things, that I just - no one ever talks about, and everyone's like, "oh, I did a studio visit," or "have you done any studio visits?" And no one ever talks about what you're meant to be doing in these studio visits. And actually for me, when I first started doing them, they were a really daunting, process because, you know, you feel like you need be able to offer someone something at the end of the studio visit, or you feel in some way it's bound to this sort of transactional thing. But for me anyway, it's become a really, really great way to just get to know people and remember that, you know, everyone's a person and actually this is a space for you to engage with their work and, you know, they're giving up their time to talk to you as well. So I always think it's really important to do your research and make sure you have looked at their work. I often request a portfolio or a website link or something before I arrange to meet so that I can make sure I have questions prepared that, I feel like I can talk about their work in some ways, or at least offer my impression of their work and just try to engage in conversation, I think would be my advice. And follow up. I think always follow up with people afterwards. You know, you've both given up an hour or so of your time. It's nice just to thank people and see where the conversation may go. You never know, in six months time it might be an opportunity to sort of do a show with that person or meet up with them again. But it's something that's never spoken about, so.

1525: What experience got you to your current position?

Olivia: I don't think there's one experience. I think it's a variety. I did an undergraduate degree at Leeds, in History of Art, and I think I chose that because I loved art. I couldn't, I didn't think I could make art. I didn't really know what I would ever make. I couldn't draw, and it was like the sort of next thing that I felt I could be excited about. So I chose to do that, but never really across the whole three years that I was studying was it ever really discussed what job that might end up in. So I sort of had this degree, I knew I was really excited by artists, by art, by exhibitions. I found myself sort of actually leaning towards understanding what exhibitions were and what they meant and sort of how they happened. But not really understanding what the hell I was going to do with this degree, which I think a lot of people finish uni feeling. I ended up literally applying for everything and anything that looked remotely interesting. So I did a lot of invigilation, a lot of gallery assistant work. I ended up working in sort of small commercial galleries, which is a very different experience to what I do now. I did an internship at The Guardian at one point. I did some temping work in an office like on a reception desk, but all of this is to say, it wasn't irrelevant and so much of doing that work now, has sort of fed into my perspective of what I do and the sort of work in the commercial galleries, the work, in- I worked in a sort of curatorial studio, the work as a gallery assistant - all allowed me to sort of paint a picture of what the sort of art world was. So whilst, you know, the work I was doing then wasn't strictly curatorial work or exhibition- making, I could very quickly understand, "ah, okay so working at a commercial gallery, there's a museum that's requested for us to give them a work from an artist that we represent," and I understood, "okay, so if I want to eventually work in one of these museums, that's the kind of work I'm going to be doing". So there was always a way to sort of, you know, if it wasn't the work I really wanted to be doing, I could work out how to get there in some way, or it had, it allowed me to sort of, you know, piece the puzzle together, I suppose. So whilst it's probably not one experience, I would just say it was all of them and sort of saying "yes" to a lot of things and even if it meant I did it for three months and, you know, cross that off the list and realised I never wanted to do it again, it allowed me to get to the point of realizing what I wanted to do; sort of by process of elimination.

1525: What was the difference about working in the commercial gallery?

Olivia: Yeah, so, I mean, I think it is shifting. And I think it has sort of changed over the last few years because you're sort of seeing commercial galleries put on thematic shows and, yeah, acting in a more sort of conceptual or curatorial way by bringing certain artists together, and it not seeming like it's for sales purposes. Whereas kind of commercial galleries - the main purpose is to sell the work of the artists that they represent. So much of the work that I was doing when I was first working in those galleries, just so of preparing price lists, taking calls from potential clients, speaking to collectors, being on the gallery floor, cleaning the gallery, preparing coffee, you know, all of the tasks and things that go into sort of keeping a commercial gallery running. Whereas, you know, in my current role, it's much more research-based. It's nothing to do with sales. It's not for profit. So you don't have that, sort of capitalist drive that sort of is underpinning all of the work that you're doing, which yeah, sort of played on my mind a lot, I suppose when I was working there.

1525: You said something about how you couldn't make art, so you decided to study Art History. But I was thinking, being exposed to so many like art and creativity on your everyday, don't you feel like sometimes you need to express yourself, like personally? Not necessarily drawing are painting, but like writing or making something creative for yourself?

Olivia: Yeah, no, I do. You know, I always think, I always think, I wish I had understood what art could be when I was younger, because I had a very, I had a very narrow minded understanding of what it could be, you know. I couldn't draw so I felt I couldn't do art, I suppose, is what I'm trying to say, and I always wish I had understood that differently when I was younger. Yeah, I do, I do feel that curatorial work is creative work. And I do feel whilst I've sort of labored over the admin and the organization qualities of the job, you know, so much of it is actually thinking through concepts, trying to creatively support artists, trying to think of new ways to give artists opportunities, which might not already be out there. And all of that I see as creative work. You know, that being said, I'm really, really trying to write more because that's another way that you can sort of, you know, creative outlet. It's something that I just don't have much time for, but something that I really miss. I used to write a lot when I was at school. And I think you see, you see people, doing similar work, that do similar work to what I do, always writing. And, you know, it's something that you can actually, I say, get paid for - you get paid very minimally - but you can get paid to sort of write as, as something that you do on the side to, to, earn more money. So it's something that can often support an independent practice if you have the time to write. But yeah, there's different ways I think, to be creative. And there's different moments in the, in the making of an exhibition where you're exercising those muscles.

1525: Definitely. Makes sense. Yeah. Thank you.

1525: Talking about like writing, I thought, is there a book that helped you with curating? Because I read a book by Hans Ulrich Olbrist, I think he's called, that is really good. So I was wondering if you have like a recommended lecture for us to better understand your job or the environment of a gallery, because we usually don't have like that experience.

Olivia: Yeah. I will share a reading list.

1525: Okay. That's great.

Olivia: Cause there are so many, there's so many, and there's also so many that say they do things and they don't. So it's good to just have recommendations. And there's also so many books that, you know, they don't even mention curating they're not about curating, but they, they theorize or they put certain ideas together in such a way that it makes you think about how to put an exhibition together, and that's what I find really interesting. That books that aren't even related to exhibitions or curating, but that you might read that make really interesting connections between things. And that's how I relate exhibition- making, you know, just finding these different anchor points and finding interesting ways to sort of bring them together in an exhibition context. And there's one called The Mushroom at the End of the World' which does that very well.

1525: Yes. You know, the practice of curation is, is constantly changing, so it's quite difficult to pinpoint that. So yeah, that's a really great approach.

Olivia: Yeah. And it's also, it's been so professionalized, you know, in the last 20 years it's become this fairly new practice, you could argue, and it's become so, "this is a way to do things," "this is a sort of template," "this is a model," but actually, you know, there's really no rules. And it's the spaces of experimentation that I find really interesting where, you know, you don't follow the rules and you start to question these frameworks that have gone before, or these templates that have gone before. Yeah, but yeah, I'll share, I'll share some, some reading.

1525: And yeah, this also like pins down to the next question, which is what aspects of your job came as the biggest surprise for you?

Olivia: I think you always have surprises with exhibitions. I mean, an example is the show that I've just worked on with French artist, Mélanie Matranga which, you know, we had numerous conversations about the work and the space and how it might be laid out and what the feeling might be. And until you're in that exhibition space, until you're in that gallery with the work, with the lighting, with whatever exhibition design, with whatever temporary walls, you actually can plan and speculate as much as you want, but it will always feel different. And I think that is the sort of element of surprise that I am learning to welcome. It's something that I really struggle with because I think I'm a bit of a control freak. So I like to really plan, plan, plan, and know what the outcome is going to be and, you know, have everything down to a T. And then when it's not like that, I sort of feel very anxious and freak out. But actually I think it's really important to just let go of that and understand that, you know, when things do change, it's changed for a reason when things feel different in the space that you need to learn to sort of react to that and adapt to that and change things and not feel bound to what you've agreed to do. You know, just feel like you can change things when, surprises happen. And yeah, I'm telling myself that I'm enjoying those things, but it takes practice.

1525: What's like the biggest disaster or like the funniest thing to have happened to you during an exhibition?

Olivia: Oh, God! Disaster. I mean, works not arriving on time. Works getting lost, just being told that they're not in the warehouse. Works being damaged is like, you feel like you might sort of pass out. I do anyway. Even just working through the pandemic. I was, you know, the artist who I just worked with wasn't able to travel for the show, and when I first sort of realized that that was going to be the reality, I was really, really worried about it. You know, how do you work in such a huge space as that gallery, without the artist there and feel like you've done your job and, you know, with them not seeing the show, it feels I was really conflicted, but you know, technology, we made it work somehow. We were speaking all the time and you sort of work through these things and realize that it's okay to feel comfortable while you do it, and just to sort of embrace that for, for a few days and realize that it will all pass.

1525: You mentioned like COVID and I was thinking about like how things are turning a lot more online and there's a lot more of online spaces, art and exhibitions. I was thinking, what do you think like you lose something when you change, like from in-person spaces to online spaces, or do you think that you can like find a way to still have the full experience full online?

Olivia: I think it totally depends on the project. I think if you are just transferring an exhibition, that's meant for, you know, physical space for, to be sort of experienced IRL. I think when you put it online, you do lose something the same way as if you make something for online, and then you try to experience it in physical space you just, you know, there's a kind of disjointedness or, you know, you don't get the full, the full feeling. That being said, I think there is like so many incredible projects and works being developed for online space that go beyond anything you could experience like in a gallery space or in real space that, you know, really pushing like expectations of what an exhibition might look like. You know, this just world-building element that you can completely run with online is, is changing things. And there are some artists who are just doing amazing things with technology as well that's really changing the way we experience the world in real life. So I think, you know, I don't think we should see them as opposites because it's so blurry and those spaces are kind of bleeding into one another all the time. But yeah, I think there's definitely, they're definitely different. And you sort of have different challenges in each space, but I think you can do both, you know, really well.

1525: What has been your favorite exhibition at Nottingham Contemporary so far?

Olivia:This is a very biased answer, but it's gotta be 'Grace Before Jones'. Just because I guess it was the first group show that I was involved in and to that extent. So it was amazing that I had the opportunity to work with, Cédric, who was the previous exhibitions curator, who, you know, really involved myself and the exhibition designer, Borja, from a very, very early stage, which was incredible. And, you know, whilst he had a sort of, you know, a very clear idea of what the exhibition would be and how it should look and, you know, a preliminary list of works. He was very open for us to us sort of contributing to that, to shaping that, to challenging that. And yeah, I just think that kind of open dialogue really allowed for an amazing exhibition. One that felt like a real collaborative effort. One that just bought so many incredible works over to Nottingham for the show. You know, works that I have been wanting to see personally for so many years. Such a mix of kind of really well-known names and kind of more emerging, let's say, artists. And then just also the sort of live aspect, you know, having the music, the lighting, it just felt just really authentic. But I mean, I worked on it, so I would say it was my favourite.

1525: I think it's one of my favourites. At least since I've, I've worked here - incredible, well done. Well done, Olivia! What is the one piece of advice you would have given to your younger self when entering the world of work?

Olivia: It's a really hard question. Because there's loads of things that I would now tell myself to do differently or to think about earlier on. But I think the sort of most general or sort of like pertinent one is just, don't be afraid to ask questions and just ask loads of questions and don't be afraid because there are so many things that I realised when, you know, I first started working, that I could have just asked the first person I met that was doing the job or the first job that I had, I could've just asked them once and it would have saved me so much time, so much trying to work out in my own head. And people actually - the thing I've come to realize is people actually love being asked questions. So the whole idea of like, I'm going to ask it, you know, that whole concept of not wanting to ask a question is actually not helping anyone. So that would be my advice. Always question things.

1525: Thank you so much, you, that was such a great discussion. Really super helpful. And Olivia is currently working on the, the commission is called ‘The Temple’. We're going to be working on that in September, so very, very exciting.