1525: Behind the Scenes Interviews

**Olivia Aherne**

What do you do at Nottingham Contemporary?

I’m the Assistant Curator of Exhibitions. I develop and support a programme of exhibitions, spanning new commissions, solo shows and thematic group exhibitions. I work closely with another Assistant Curator, Chief Curator and Director to research, plan and deliver shows, as well as performances, cross-departmental collaborations and publications.

What are your day-to-day tasks? What is your average work day like?

The role entails research, project/budget management, co-ordination, scheduling, a huge amount of communication and my day can include anything from speaking directly to artists and other galleries, to organising the transportation of loans from museum collections. On an average day, I’ll start by working through emails, responding to any outstanding requests – these can be internal and from other colleagues, for example I might share information on upcoming exhibitions with Learning or liaise with Marketing on mediation. I also regularly speak with people outside of the organisation, this might include talking to colleagues from other organisations who we’re collaborating with, exhibition designers or art transportation companies. I usually schedule meetings in the afternoons, where possible and I try to find time to research off site when I can, either for other exhibitions or studio visits.

What experience got you your current position?

I think I real variety of experience. When I left university, I was still trying to work out exactly what I wanted to do and what that looked like in the ‘real world’. I applied for everything and anything that looked remotely interesting and found myself working in commercial galleries, as an exhibition invigilator, even a brief stint at the Guardian. Whilst they aren’t all relevant now it did allow me to get a good grasp on how things work in the ‘art world’, from many different perspectives. I also think it helps to speak to people, see exhibitions, start to understand what you like, what you think works well and what doesn’t, and begin to articulate that.

What aspect of your job came as the biggest surprise?

No matter how much you plan an exhibition, there will always be suprises! It can be anything from things not arriving on time or works feeling different in the space, I think it’s really important to learn to let go (which is easier said than done) and understand that change/unexpected moments can be an enjoyable thing.

What has your favourite exhibition been in Nottingham Contemporary so far?

It has to be Grace Before Jones, Camera, Disco, Studio, it’s a biased answer as it’s a project I worked closely on with Cédric Fauq (the previous Curator, Exhibitions). From the start, he had a very clear idea of what the show would do and what it would look like however, he was very open to working together – with Borja Velez, the exhibition designer – on shaping that vision. Seeing it come to life, in the galleries with music, lighting and such a beautiful selection of works was such a highlight.

How do you choose artists that you exhibit?

This totally depends on the season that we’re programming for and there are many variables from the time of year, the availability of the artist, what else we’re planning to present in the galleries across that year. Overall, the programme aims to have a balance of more ‘emerging’ or ‘underrepresented’ artists versus some more well-known names. It’s also incredibly important for us to present artists from a range of backgrounds whether than be gender identity, nationality, heritage, or age. Sometimes we look to support an artist with their first solo show in the UK and at other times, it might be an opportunity to work with a well-known practitioner on a new large-scale commission.

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

Don’t be afraid to ask questions, ask lots of them!