1525: Behind the Scenes – Phillippa Sharpe

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 is it that you do at the Nottingham Contemporary?

Philippa: So, I'm development manager. So that is basically responsible for maintaining and growing the sort of, profit and income of Nottingham Contemporary. So I don't know if a lot of you understand the various different strands that go into, kind of, the income when it comes to like a not-for-profit organization like ours. So museums, galleries, libraries, you know, institutions; they always have these various different strands. You know, you have your principle funders and then Arts Council England and Nottingham city council. We obviously have long-term partners within the universities and then everything that falls outside of that, that's what I look after. So that is from individuals. We've got a wonderful patron circle to kind of compiling, researching, and leading on grant applications and bids. I do events, prospect tours, gallery tours, exhibition previews, biennial gala dinners, different artist lunches, you name it. I've probably tried to hold it, if it's got an outcome that will benefit Nottingham Contemporary. I also secure sponsorship, that's through corporate giving and that's various different brands for different events. And I also look after the artist editions side of what we [00:02:00] do, which is where we work with the artists who have exhibited with us to produce work that I sell, and the money goes back to support our programmes. It's a, it's a very varied role.

1525: What's your average work day like? Like, what do you do, what are your tasks and stuff?

Philippa: An average work day? I'm sure everyone will probably give you this terrible opening answer, but there's no such thing. You know, I've just named how many things that I could look after and they all don't come at once, they can come at different focuses. So, you know, depending on what, where we are in the year, where we are in the programme, I could be doing anything from organizing events. So sending out invite lists, making sure that I'm contacting people to provide catering, performances, you name it. I could be looking at that. I could also be researching grants and foundations, something that I'm sure if you guys are thinking about going into the world of the arts, you'll have some crossover and you'll get to know that kind of side. And that's about looking at supporting commissions, supporting projects, supporting programs, supporting events, supporting the production of a publication. It's looking to see if there's a funding body, whether that's public or private, that would be interested in supporting that. Whether that's through an open call or whether that's about something that we need to nurture a little bit more from a trustee and a founding point of view. I can also do from selling the artist editions. I would say the main thing I want to do is sell them. So I look after the web shop, I do international art fairs. That's from London, New York, various different Europe places. And you know, the lead up to that can be, you could be organizing shipping, you could be organizing the production of the actual artist edition which I do in consultation with a woman called Vicky Steer, who works for various different not-for-profits around the country - really great producer of editions. And yeah, we get to work with these artists; produce some kind of affordable works. You know, some of these original works can go for big figures and this is a nice, accessible route to be able to connect, if your art is a habit and your collection, whatever size that is, you know, it doesn't need to belong in a museum, it could just, it could hang on a wall in your living room. And it's about me making sure that those works are out there and getting sold. And obviously there's a lot of marketing that goes around all of this. So whether it's communications to patrons, whether it's communications internally about how we can message, kind of speak to the people, different people, we're working with, different audiences. There's so many different things you can be doing, and it's a very fluid role. And that's kind of the great thing about it, I'd say. It's, it can be as varied as you like. You can do it as strict as you like. Just like everything we do at Nottingham Contemporary, we are quite ambitious and we're quite flexible with that.

1525: Yeah. It sounds like you're running around all time.

Philippa: I feel like I'm sitting down a long time. It's a lot of time on a computer actually. I'd want to be a little bit more up and about, but, as everyone knows nowadays, the main communication is like this, and I can't wait to get back into the gallery where I can actually talk to people, meet up with everyone properly, you know.

1525: Phillippa used to have the most glamorous job going on to these art fairs. And they always were like, "how was New York, Phillippa?"

Philippa: I'd come back very tired - not as glamorous as it sounds.

1525: Do you know if the art fairs are opening up?

Philippa: Yeah, I mean, Art Basel's just announced their kind of, their exhibiting list. It's a big list. I mean, we were meant to be participating in the Armory Show which is an art fair based in New York. And it's, ooh it's very long standing actually; it might've been one of the first. We were meant to be going back in 2020. So obviously that's been rearranged, so then we re- applied for 2021. And, yeah, that, that isn't happening. As much as it's probably going to be open, I think the questions around, you know, open travel, it's just too many question marks. And because we are non-for-profits we, the risk we take on, you know, invested in going to these art fairs, we have to be a little bit more cautious. So if I'm thinking about the people that might be at this art fair, if it's only going to be people from New York, not necessarily even the greater U.S., it's a greater risk, if that makes sense. But the great thing about doing the art fairs is we don't do it on our own. We do it with so many different not-for-profits around the country with it. With people like Whitechapel, Tate, the Serpentine, Chisenhale, so many different people, Glasgow International; whether it's part of our live editions, which is kind of a consortium where we all do it at Frieze London, which is a really great, a great thing if you can go visit it, maybe in this year's edition. You get to see the commercial art world and see all these different artists and kind of whether the market world is looking towards at the moment. But there's also some good focuses, some good projects. They're really building in some great kind of artist highlights in these artist fairs. So yeah, if you guys have the opportunity to go, I would definitely do so because it's, it's worth a peak, just at least.

1525: Hi, Phillippa. Just wanted to know, what was your background experience that got you to your current role?

Philippa: That's a good question. I mean, I've come from, I started where a lot of people did, I studied art and that was at the University of Brighton. And you know, around that time, which is 12 years ago now, I was doing events, and I was working in retail, and I was just, doing every odd job I could possibly find. And following that, you know, various different jobs, but I got an art advisory job in a UK- based publishing house and that's selling original and limited edition artworks to collectors based in the region, and obviously nurturing new collector kind of faces. And I grew a lot in that role. So that was the kind of key role that I transferred to this, to this job, you know, obviously with the artist editions. But, you know, fundraising, whether it's in a written form, over a grant bid or whether it's talking to an individual that might want to support your work; it's sales. You've got to be able to sell us as a charity, our programme. You've got to be able to speak about this as best you can, and remember that you've got to nurture these people, like the commercial world would with a collector. It's about making sure that you're building these good relationships with, and giving the narrative of our organization, our program and the artists that are exhibiting within it. So I think I took those commercial skills and like kind of intertwined that with my personal like, love of kind of critical fine art and yeah, blended them two together and I've been here since 2016.

1525: Hi, Phillippa. We just wanted to know, what do you like love the most about your job? And then maybe if there are any aspects that maybe you like prefer, would you prefer not to do I suppose?

Philippa: The good and bad? What do I like? So, you know, there's actually loads of things. And I think I've kind of touched on it before. What I do like the most about my job is it's so varied. I mean, there's lots you can get your teeth into it. No day feels that monotonous. It doesn't feel like I've got to do the same thing over and over again. Although, you know, you touch on everything throughout the year, it's a lot more of a fluid kind of long-term way of working and that's quite nice. It's not just based on task by task. And it's, it's quite self-led in a way, you know to work brilliantly with the rest of the team, but you also can take a step back and consider the work by myself, and that's something that's really brilliant. But you know, I'm a Nottingham girl. I was born and bred here. This is my hometown and what is actually the best thing is that I get to contribute to my city. You know, some of the projects I help realize by help securing funding, or just know that the funding that I've secured for the organization is going to support that, it does some great things, some really impactful things. Even if they're fun little activities or whether it's something that's a little bit of a bigger project, a bit of engagement, whether it's with the greater culture sector of Nottingham or, you know, a particular audience within a kind of like, more niche ranges. I think, I think that's pretty fulfilling to know that. We try to make this little city punch upwards a little bit, you know.

1525: Just wondering, do you consider your job to be more creative? Like what areas of it do you need to use more creativity or, stuff like that?

Philippa: Yes. Yes. I think you do have to think creative when you're looking at fundraising or any kind of income driven work, because everyone needs to have some income coming in. The amount of competition you've got out there, you need to make sure that you're being creative with how you kind of communicate, how you hold events, what editions you're making. You have to make sure that you're not necessarily just doing the norm, doing the, you know, ticking the boxes. Because you'll fall and you'll make sure that you'll get ignored, and that's not a great way of doing it. But I think the most creative stuff again, I think it's probably, it's probably in the planning process, which doesn't sound creative at all. But I think if you look at that creatively and you look at it in the sense of like having a bit fun, everyone that engages in it will have a little fun with it, and there's no bad thing there, you know, no one loses out.

1525: What is the process behind writing fundraising bids, and is there any training that you would recommend?

Philippa: I would say there isn't a one fit process that works for all. There's tips and there's consistencies of approach that definitely work. You know, I think first and foremost, the biggest error I have fallen into, everyone I know that does bids, falls into is not doing enough research. It's not spending enough time making sure you're looking, 'what trust foundations are out there?,' 'Do you fit the eligibility?,' 'Is your project right for this kind of narrative?'. A lot of people can waste a lot of time putting a lot of bids out there that aren't ever going to get considered because they just simply don't meet that trust's criteria. So, although it's not a process, it is something that I think every time you really have to make sure that you, you are looking into that and you're double checking it. You're not pulling on too many thin straws to make something work, because it's just your time you're wasting. But in terms of actual processes, a lot of them you'll find, you know, you get these application forms, they'll ask you the same questions from kind of like a very basic point of view. But really what they will do, and especially in their guidance, which again, read that through, make sure you go note by note exactly what they're wanting you to do, and you're covering all the points they're asking you to cover. When you go through, you'll see this consistency, and what they really want to know is a clear narrative to your project. So you don't want, they don't want lingo. They don't want it to be wrapped up in kind of a mystique. They want to know: what you want to do, why you want to do it, and what's going to be born out of this, and what's the lasting legacy? So that's from an individual's point of view. What are you going to create? What commission are you working on? Where are you planning to study research? Whatever it might be. What do you want to come out of this? And why, why does that need to happen? And you know, those three things seem very simple, but I think a lot of the time when people are approaching it, whether it's me approaching it for the organization or people approaching it for their own research programme, for example. It's that they forget to think of the fundamental is: what are we actually doing? And why do we need to do this? It sometimes becomes over complicated. So it's not an exact process, but I think it's a way of thinking. You need to remember to keep it simple.

1525: How does the Nottingham art scene compares to that of larger cities?

Philippa: I think this group is evidence for itself. I think there's a brilliant, brilliant group of individual practitioners, creatives, makers, thinkers. There's so many people around this city that make it good. And we've got some brilliant spaces as well, you know, not just us. There's Primary, New Art Exchange, Backlit - we've got some brilliant stuff going on. But we're a small city, you know. I think we punch up. I think we have punched up for a while and I think that's in the various different areas, whether it's visual arts or music, you know, I think there's so much going on here. But, you know, like all regional cities we need further investment from, from the powers that be, we need a lot more care. And I think when we get that, when we know that we've got true investment in regional culture, you'll see some really phenomenal places come about and I think Nottingham will be one of them.

1525: So what is the one piece of advice you would have given to your younger self when entering the world of work?

Philippa: Have fun with it. Try as much as you can. I mean, I think that advice is applicable to all ages. I think it's easier to do when you're younger to try as many different roles and different career paths as you possibly can. But keep reminding yourself that, you know, as and when I need to start reminding that to myself, to my current self and to my future self is to keep trying new things and explore. You'll find a path that works for you. That's it.

1525: Do you ever start kind of like funding first? So if there's a specific type of project that you have funding for, but you don't have the project itself, would you then find an artist who's in that space, kind of?

Philippa: I think it's part of the consideration. I think that that would fall, if you look at the curators, I think they have to consider if a project is going to be feasible against the budget they've already got, and if they need to secure extra funding is that going to be possible? You know, I think that will always come at the curation point of view because there's some brilliant ideas out there, but if they're not achievable because either they cost too much or they'll be too much of a risk sometimes, you know, they just can't quite get to that stage of completion. But, I think if it turns into just purely, we see something and we say, "look, this is a great, great funding kind of pot, there's some money here. How can we make it work?" I think that's probably been done, especially when you look at awards, you know, there'll be these kinds of gallery awards or something come up and you say like, well actually, maybe we could do something that fits in this, you know, exhibition awards. Especially within the Freelands Award with Lis Rhodes. You know, we formed that exhibition around that because they needed like a mid-career female artist from the UK. So, you know, you have to think with a very strict criteria in mind, and it was a successful one as well. So yeah, I don't think it's necessarily the way a lot of people do it, but I think it's, it's done quite a lot, yeah.

1525: Is there any database anywhere where someone can find potential funding and things like that?

Philippa: There is, and there's lots and that's slightly the problem as well is it's so overwhelming. Especially from an individual practitioner's point of view. I think you can look at, there's some really good examples of, kind of, funding bids on places like the White Pube, for example. They have a whole funding library where you can see examples of different applications to research commissions, kind of COVID relief at the minute, whatever you say. And obviously through those kind of libraries that you can see of examples, you can see what names are out there and you can see who's around. A good tip as well as if you're looking at practitioners is whenever you go to an exhibition, whenever you're going to a networking event; speak to people. Look, who's sponsoring that event. Look, if that artist is represented and who might be funding it. A lot of the time when, for example, I'm looking from an organization's point of view. If we're thinking of say an exhibition, I would say, well, what's been happening across the world? Who's been supporting like exhibitions that are looking into sculptors or, or a, you know, particular theme within the culture sector? And you know, you kind of, you map it from there. There's a thing called money mapping, which is looking at what's out there. And this is a form of money mapping; it's researching what you know, which is the type of artwork or the type of event that you wanted to put on, and seeing who's already interested in that. And then obviously thinking outside the box saying, well, if these types of people, if that's their focus, what else? Who else do I know that does that? And that's when you can go back to kind of straightforward listings of trust foundations, which can be quite exhausting. You know, there's ones from kind of BSC that's for all charities. So I'll just show you an example of why I mean it's exhaustive. This is just the directory for 2021. And if you see the flip, you're just met with lists and lists of names, and that can be hugely overwhelming. I mean, that's obviously for the whole charity sector, that's not just for artists because that would be brilliant actually, because it means there'd be loads of funding out there. But it can be quite exhaustive. So I think a real approachable way of doing that is through, like I say, looking who's supporting it. Through looking on independent collectors websites. See at the bottom, if they're supported by anyone. Speaking to different people that you know are working on projects. Ask like, how have you secured commission funding? Feed into everyday conversation? And then as and when you have an application, you've got information to work from because you've had those conversations first. Now let's say you've got a project and you haven't done any of that, and you're like, oh, I really want to, I really want to give this a go. The first port of call is always Arts Council. And I'm sure, you know, you can see different training courses through various different people, arts fundraising and plans for organizations, BSC, there's different networks like Young Arts Fundraisers and stuff like that. But there's also so many resources from people like yourself that have written blogs and posts and stuff about how they've approached doing an artist application, and those to me are sometimes brilliant to read because they speak from a human point of view rather than a training point of view. And, you know, I know in Nottingham, for example, there's networks that offer training on stuff like funding bids like Fly Go. I think Avani puts on different training workshops just locally and that'd probably be in the city center as far as I'm aware. So there's, there's loads of little things popping about, but I would say the simplest trick is: keep your eye open. Every time you see a, see an exhibition, every time you see a commission coming up, every time you see a digital, weird, wonderful project online, see what person supporting it, or it might be a little business name, it might be a trusted foundation name, it might be an individual's name.

Just have a little think, see if you know them.

Practical advice.

I just think if I direct you to a website, you're going to look on the website and you'll see a bunch of names that just, yeah, but who they could, they could be gobboldy-gook, you know, who knows?

1525: As you said before, it's a lot more about the [00:20:00] thought process of how to find the lead, then like the directory itself.

Philippa: Exactly, exactly. And understanding, you know, what you want to do. It's the same as what I was saying about the process for when you would actually go to write it is say, well, what am I doing? Put it down in the straight and narrow, and just figure out from there. Simple Google searches; 4 different artists, 4 different events. You know, even if you're looking at particular artists that you know is similar to your works, but what would be a little bit more established or whatever it would be, look at their CV. See if they've participated in awards, residencies. See if they've done group exhibitions, solo exhibitions, Google those shows and see if they're sponsored by anyone and you will start seeing trends and different likenesses because you'll be looking in a very particular area. It's little tricks like that can really open up your understanding of what's achievable and what's not. And if there's going to be support out there and if there isn't.

1525: I think it's, it's such a difficult job. I mean, I was just saying to the group, while we were trying to find funding for this, you know, for the continuation of the youth programme, it was probably one of the most stressful few months of my job here. So to think that that's constantly, you know, your job it's, it's a lot because it's sometimes you just put so much work in for an application and and it doesn't, and it doesn't happen. How do you reconcile that? Do you just have to get over it?

Philippa: It's, it's part, it's part of it. You've just got to realize for everyone that gets a no answer, so there's only a few, that's had a yes. And that could be for the simplest and tiniest of reasons. People often, I hear, especially individual artists, get really down when they've had multiple no applications come from say, Arts Council, and you know, it can make you quite disheartened and I completely understand that. But the thing that you've got to realize, a lot of these funders are very oversubscribed. You know, there's a lot of people out there that are, have some really wonderful ideas and there's just, there's not some, unfortunately, very unfortunately there's only so much out there that you can go for. So if it's a no at first, take a breather, step back and then go again. Have a rethink. Think, oh, maybe what would have been the reason that this wasn't successful? Maybe it wasn't clear enough. Maybe this didn't have as much of an engagement kind of outcome that they wanted. What is it that, you know, may have been this and then try to speak to those people as well. They often will give feedback. If they don't give feedback, they'll state in the application guidance, they'll say we don't get back to you. And then, you know, at least, you know, if you're going to get a no, it's just a no. It's swings and roundabouts, isn't it? That's life.

I know very, very successful artists who still get rejected and they, you know, reapply with the same project to the Arts Council. So, a good friend of mine who's in the British Art Show really, you know, really on top of her career at the moment. So that one project's gone through, three times rejected and she's putting it in for a fourth time [00:23:00] and it's that kind of resilience that I think is really hard to get to, but it does lead to success. For every success you see one artist have, or a gallery have it's, there's so many failures behind it. But it doesn't matter who you are. It doesn't matter whether you're just starting out. It doesn't matter whether you're on your own, you're in a collective, you're part of a small gallery, like kind of, you know, midsize organization. How do you describe us, Phillippa?

I mean we're a non collecting kind of space. So, you know, we kind of, we're one of the largest contemporary spaces in Europe. So I guess we are large, but we haven't got that collection largeness behind us. Yeah, I mean, even a large, large, you know, or large, or like, you know, the British Museum, I'm sure has the same situation. So. It's exhausting.

It's exhausting. And it's meetings. These big places have big teams looking at income behind them, whether that's commercial instead of profit, you know, it's, it takes work. But I think it's a very different thing when you're looking from an individual's point of view, because it's a personal bid you know, it's so much closer to you I think, and, it's one of those things. I think don't let funding bids dictate how you feel about your own practice, about the project. It's not connected to that at all. It's unfortunately just competition and demand.

1525: Thank you so much, Phillippa. It's been really lovely to have you, and I'm sure we'll have you back again to do something more in-depth. I was saying maybe something more practical, like workshops or something about funding bids.

Philippa: You know, if there's an appetite out there, obviously only if there is one. I'm happy to go over anything like that and get to know you a little bit better. Say hello a bit more.