1525: Behind the Scenes – Ryan Kearney

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: Thank you for joining us, Ryan. It's really nice to see you. I know you've come to our meetings before, but yeah, this is all about you. We've come up with some questions and you know, this conversation can, it's, you know, cause we sent them to you. But it's nice to have something to turn into a podcast and we'll just follow the format of the questions that you've already had, but if conversation veers off, that's completely fine. But yeah, first question?

1525: Yes. We'll start by asking what do you do at Nottingham Contemporary?

Ryan: So at NC I work as the assistant curator of public programmes and research. Which is a department that's soon to change to live programmes. So we basically research towards and produce events, including talks, conversations, workshops, and performances. We also run the Contemporary Journal, which is an online journal, which publishes contribution. So kind of essays, moving image sound pieces, which really kind of attend to some of our kind of long-term research kind of strands and concerns.

1525: What are your day-to-day tasks and what is your average work day like?

Ryan: It really varies a lot. But it's kind of really heavily kind of focused on digital production. So event production. So yesterday I met with poets, Raymond Antrobus, Bhanu Kapil and Nat Raja, just over Zoom, like we are now, to pre-record our event, which is going to be premiering next week; next Thursday, 1st of July on our YouTube channel. And that's part of the Critical Poetics, summer school that we're doing with Nottingham Trent University and Curated & Created. So generally it's just kind of working on, yeah, an event from inception. So research, all of the kind of boring admin stuff that comes with that, marketing, and the other kind of event production.

1525: What experience got you your current position?

 So I did a lot of volunteering back when I lived in my hometown of Birmingham, which was alongside some of my first kind of jobs in hospitality. But I think there's a really, I think there's yeah, a conversation to have around the kind of exploitative practices of volunteering and interning that are really prevalent in the arts and I'm not sure if it's something that's changed much. I can't imagine it is actually something that's changed much in the time that I was volunteering versus now. But I don't think it's the only way to get your foot in the door. I kind of did some work as an independent curator - managed to kind of land funding through Arts Council England for a project at Recent Activity, which is a small kind of project space in Birmingham. And that project was called 'The Club's Conception (or How the Egg was Cracked)'. So that was looking, so that was an exhibition, and public program basically, that looked to retrace the history of Birmingham's longest running queer venue through oral history and through interviews. So, yeah, I mean, I guess the best thing you can do early on is in my opinion, is to prioritize your, your own kind of artistic and curatorial research. Just kind of build, build your experience from there.

1525: What are you interested in now in terms of research, Ryan?

Ryan: So it's still kind of very much in a similar vein. So I'm working towards, yeah, building on the research that I've kind of already been doing on kind of oral history and how we can take a cross-generational approach to oral history. So myself as a younger kind of queer person meeting with, older queer people, interviewing them about their experiences in queer spaces, asking them to describe queer spaces visually. So that we can start to build a kind of oral record of what some of these kind of clubs, bars, and different kinds of queer spaces looked like, because we don't so much have a kind of visual or kind of written description of those spaces for a whole kind of number of reasons. So, yeah, it's just kind of testing out those different kind of approaches. In the longer term, I'm very much kind of interested in how kind of curators and researchers more generally might be able to work with artists with these oral histories to create more of a kind of visual archive of memory.

1525: What do you love about your job?

Ryan: So, yeah, I mean, one big thing really is this idea of just how much the, the kind of roles and the duties vary on, on the day-to-day. I know that's a really cliché thing to say. But, while I might kind of have some long-term projects, each week generally brings with it a new event, a new kind of output, a new kind of research project to work on, just that kind of spontaneity I think that's kind of, that kind of comes with museum jobs.

1525: What aspect of your job came as the biggest surprise?

Ryan: Yeah. I mean also a really cliché answer, and areally obvious one. But COVID completely shifted my job from, being a kind of in-person , you know, kind of working on in-person live events. And just, yeah, kind of very quickly having to adapt to working digitally, much like yourselves have done. And just kind of assessing the new needs of our audiences, our international kind of digital communities and kind of thinking about how we might address these through our events. So now that moving back into in-person events, it's going to be really interesting because actually I've kind of been working in this job longer in a digital capacity than I had in a kind of in-person capacity. So it's kind of like going back to an older job in a funny way.

1525: What do you think are the pros and cons? I know it's quite a big question, but the pros and cons of working digitally, running events digitally, as opposed to in-person?

Ryan: I mean, I think a really obvious one is just, how much the programme opens up. When you're working in- person and you're kind of delivering on- site, you obviously kind of have to keep in mind kind of travel and accommodation and all of the, kind of really boring kind of logistic or kind of budgetary concerns that come with running a programme. And that kind of limits you really to speakers and artists in the UK, to contributers in the UK or kind of locally in Europe. It kind of stops you from kind of reaching out to those who are maybe based kind of further, farther away. I think that working digitally has just kind of allowed us to run a programme of talks and kind of conversations that is lot more international.

1525: I guess relating to that, how collaborative is your work at Nottingham Contemporary?

Ryan: In all honesty, I guess it didn't really start off as all that collaborative a role. But we've been doing a lot of work internally just to kind of break down some of the departmental barriers that do exist. So public programmes now works a lot more with exhibitions, but also with 1525 through opportunities to contribute to readings around the exhibitions and public programmes. So that's something that we did for the 'Grace Before Jones' exhibition with the Grace Jones musings reading series. But in a kind of general point in museums, I think exhibitions and live programs could always be more collaborative, both kind of internally, but in reaching out to our audiences, our communities, and just involving them more in our processes.

1525: How do you cater to the public's needs when you're organising events?

Ryan: So since kind of moving digitally we've been doing a lot more in terms of accessibility. So captioning our kind of live and prerecorded events, which wasn't something that we were offering before. And also kind of from a marketing standpoint, offering all text descriptions of the images that we post to social media and just loads of these kinds of small tools that just kind of help to open up the programme a little bit more. Though, to be honest, I think there's a lot more work that we could be doing as an organization to meet these needs. One project that we're working on at the moment is with researcher, Dr. Sarah Hayden, and with assistant curator Hannah Wallis who's also based at NC. We're working on a series of talks, workshops, moving image screenings, which kind of look at how we might better approach accessibility and captioning as curators, as artists, and as cultural practitioners more generally. So that's going to be a series that's coming in September.

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

Ryan: I think it would be to, take it slow and to not worry so much about the future. I think the arts is a really competitive sector. So I think there's a lot of emphasis, whether that's from, you know, your kind of friends, your contemporaries, or your tutors at uni - a lot of emphasis on gaining experiences, opportunities, and just generally kind of bettering your CV. But I also don't think there's any harm in testing the waters. Just kind of finding a sector, an industry, or a kind of vocation that works for you. So in a sense, I do kind of wish I'd maybe taken a little bit more time and just been a little bit more relaxed, and kind of enjoyed, enjoyed that process a little bit more.

1525: Why did you choose to work at Nottingham Contemporary?

Ryan: So I was really interested in Nottingham Contemporary and the kind of public programmes more specifically, just because of how unique it is. There's not a whole lot of museums actually that have a dedicated public programmes department, at least not so much in the UK, it's really a kind of handful of organizations. And I think museums more generally tend to kind of place a lot of emphasis on exhibitions as their kind of sole and main output, their main kind of research output. So it was really great to see a department that places a really kind of key emphasis on the importance of talks and of workshops and just connecting more in a kind of a personal level with audiences. So, yeah, that was definitely one thing that I was interested in when I took the role.

1525: Quick question: what do you think is your, like, if you could choose your top exhibition that's been on at NC since you've been working there, like your favourite one?

Ryan: So my favorite one would probably be the 'Grace Before Jones' exhibition. Probably cause just really inelegantly, I was really obsessed with Grace Jones when I was a teenager and I had like a kind of three-year, really strong obsession. So I was really excited to kind of be working, on that exhibition with, you know, a kind of pop culture - on a kind of pop culture icon on a programme around that. But also I think the exhibition just lended itself so much to, to kind of wider themes. So it wasn't so much necessarily focused on Grace Jones, but using her as a kind of catalyst to explore kind of themes around the AIDS crisis, LGBTQIA+ rights, which I think is a really kind of important thing to kind of address through exhibitions and through the kind of program, so, yeah.

1525: Great. Thank you so much, Ryan. That was really, it's always so helpful, like, and I've known you for a while, but it's just so nice to hear these extra little bits, since I've gotten to know you more.