

Question and Answer Session with Mel Rye and Morgan Tipping

Morgan Tipping (animator and audio artist): Yeah so my artistic practice. I'm a socially engaged artist. I'd say my work is typified less by form and more by process and intention. An artist called Tanya Brigherer said that the place of art is one of questioning and social doubt of wanting to understand and realise change. So I very much fall in line with her ideologies. I work with different people whose experiences are very heavily influenced by marginalisation, whether it is economic, political or social and I co-create platforms for change for people in a very creative way which lead to a number of different outcomes so it might be film, audio, animation, events, and sometimes structures that are about pure agitation and contestation. So because of my interest in social history, social narrative and the social experience I think that was my main role of involvement in the More Than Oliver Twist project. Exploring historic stories and drawing on endless possibilities, rich possibilities of how to connect that to contemporary experience in a very relevant, emotively impactful and hopefully in a way that catalyses social change.

Megan Dennis (Chair, The Workhouse Network): Fab. Thanks very much Morgan. And Mel, how about you?

Mel Rye, Visual Artist: Hi everyone. It's very nice to see you all and thanks again to Megan for organising this morning. So I am an illustrator, but I am a very multi-disciplinary illustrator, so working in lots of different mediums and my work is quite responsive, so I respond to the themes that are being explored or the people that I am working with to create the projects. In addition to that I also have another strand to my work which is in teaching as well so I really enjoyed working on this project because it brought together lots of things that I love and collaborating with Morgan is great as well. This is the second project that we have collaborated on. To bring together Morgan's fantastic work, the audio work and working with the volunteers has been fantastic to bring some of these amazing stories to life.

Megan: Fab thank you. We have got our first question from the floor. Thank you Belinda. Belinda says "What did you get out of the project, and were there any surprises?"

Morgan: Hi Belinda! One of the things we got out of it was meeting people like Belinda, who's an amazing storyteller, so that is my very brief answer.

Megan: Mel do you have anything to add? What was one of the things you got out of working on More Than Oliver Twist?

Mel: I think the same thing. Just being able to talk to so many people about the project and finding out about not just the research, but things that that had led to and also the researchers' backgrounds and how they came to the project as well. It was so interesting, as well, to hear about the wider context of More Than Oliver Twist because Morgan and I have come to the project at a relatively late stage after the bulk of the research work has been done, so at the beginning we only really knew about the six stories in the brief so hearing about the wider context of the project and it just kept unfolding, all these little stories and nuggets of information. It's just been really fascinating to get a much broader perspective of not just the project as a whole but all of the researchers and teams that have been working so hard to uncover all this research.

Morgan: And to add onto that, I completely agree with Mel, if we think about the contemporary situation, to be undertaking this in the midst of a pandemic where there have been lots of arguments for universal basic income and keeping people on a universal credit structure and all of the different issues that are involved with those kinds of system of support to be looking back at a specific window of time where different workhouses were operating very differently and the situation was very different based on whether you were in a rural or urban location, whether you were somebody who was labelled as deserving or undeserving and all of those labels and all of those ways of stratifying and utilising people which is very problematic. It has been a very emergent and prescient issue that still overshadows the contemporary. I work with people who are labelled as “disabled” today and many of those people have been, throughout the pandemic, do not resuscitate forms. Many of these issues are very much part of how we organise social care and we can do a lot better in the present. One of the things I really got out of the project was a huge sense of solidarity with how many people are really invested in exploring these issues in the past as a way to objectively understand how we have arrived at what we have got today. It has been very, very rich and very, very interesting for that reason.

Megan: Fab. We’ve got one now here for Mel. Mel it is about your illustrations and how you chose the themes and objects in those detailed and very beautiful illustrations for each of the six lives.

Mel: That’s a really good question. Obviously the six, each of the lives we were exploring there is just a huge amount of research in each one and it was going to be impossible to include everything and it was quite an organic process. So I spent about a month just having those conversations with different people at sites and the volunteers ideas and just gathering some visual ideas and mood boards around each of the stories. Gradually over time I started to think about what were the key, most important parts, visual symbols. Some of those came out of conversations with volunteers, I think I was actually sent a little sketch by one of them, Ripon was based on a sketch I was sent by one of the volunteers and I used these to create these visual identities if you like. I wanted them all to be very different but to convey some of the research but also the stories behind the researchers themselves and how they have come to the project because some of those things that I have included aren’t necessarily facts about the person themselves, but they may be have come out conversations with the researchers like the Harriet Perkins one for example is based on a handkerchief and that came out of a conversation I had with Linda about the research and then over time deciding what to keep in and to take out was also really informed by the audio works, alongside my process Morgan was working on the audio pieces and she was sending me rough drafts of what was going to be in the audio work and that really helped me to crystallise what should be within each of the illustrations. I didn’t finalise the compositions until Morgan had pretty much completed the audio pieces so that it made sense and I still couldn’t include everything that was in the audio, but I tried to include the key pieces as much as possible.

Megan: That’s fab. So this is more of an abstract one, but it is one of our volunteers reflecting on her research and wondering what your thoughts might be and saying that workhouses deliberately created the impression that they were terrible because they needed to show local rate payers that they were not making life too easy for the inmates, but within the walls of the workhouse there might have been quite a lot of humanity. From your readings and research for the artistic pieces does that tally with your findings?

Morgan: I think people’s lives are complex and I think that when you delve into the politics of any institution you are going to find a very intense PR machine at work and one of the things that came

out of the project which was a very key intention behind using voices that have applicable relevant histories, experiences that relate is to draw out the identity and complexity of an individual experience which is often (which is what my work explores) at odds with and I conflict with the demands of an institution and that is quite an interesting territory full of contradictions and paradoxes and I think the workhouses across the country are no exception and I think you see that very palpably, not only do you see that in the historic narratives, you see instances of real kindness, for example Benjamin Newell, it seems from the evidence that was presented to us through the research teams, he was taken under the wing of a shoe maker who had a personal interest in apprenticing and training and looking after marginalised young men who otherwise could have fallen through the gaps, and trained them up to be boot finishers. So you see human stories of connection and compassion and solidarity and sheer intelligence which we tried to match with contemporary experiences that also show that there is never a straight forward answer and I think that that is the point of this project over all. People can be caricatured and stereotyped unless you look at those complexities and explore it with integrity.

Megan: Fab so here's another tricky one. Did you notice any differences between the ways the six workhouses were operating and how is that shown in your work?

Mel: Do you mean operating now or were operating then?

Megan: Oh – that is a good one. I think it would probably be better to talk about operating then rather than operating now.

Mel: I think it was always going to be more difficult for us to get, you know we were very lucky that we had the volunteers to give us fantastic insights into the workhouses in place of us being able to physically visit. So Morgan and I both had some experience of Southwell and Gressenhall. We both visited those workhouses and actually even just in seeing those two we were quite struck by how different they were. I think in terms of knowing what differences might have existed historically I don't necessarily feel that that really strongly came through in the research I was doing in terms of looking for the visuals. I was looking a lot for the visual identity of those workhouses and textures and a lot of the areas I was trying to delve into. It was clear that there were some local needs that were being met, you know there was a large vagrant community for example in Guildford and some of them had specific identities in that way. But in terms of how they were operating it didn't seem that they were starkly different to me from the conversations I had. I don't know if Morgan found any different.

Morgan: Thanks Mel. I was just going to say, as somebody who has worked in refugee camps, where there are different, but maybe scarily familiar ideas about warehousing people I found it interesting for example speaking to Helen from Gressenhall who was talking about on the ground the kind of legal and political loopholes that you could find. So she was talking about how at Gressenhall because it is essentially a village context there are different things about not being able to work and having to give up your tools, which obviously if you are something like a professional carpenter is absurd because you are then ensuring that that person is kind of indentured and stuck in that system...soften the corners of the infrastructure and I would definitely say with the situation with people in refugee camps in Greece when I was working there, there were many people, myself included who were working around political structures like you are not allowed to work which is actually against the UN HCR Human Rights convention but finding little loopholes around things, so I think those things continue today which is what I found fascinating. It about how you seemingly

have this blanket structure and seemingly it is uniform, utilitarian and hermetically sealed structure that even then people were shaving off the edges, and softening the edges and finding ways round things and I think there is a lot more research to be done on that. I think that is really fascinating and for me, you know, politically stimulating territory to explore.

Megan: Yeah, fab, I think you know we have talked about in our training and conversations I can see happening in the chat the way that locally that kind of humanity I guess of people working within the structure would find ways to support those, particularly the “deserving poor” the ones who it was felt were there for no reason (fault) of their own. Okay so going back to the exhibition, this is a question about turning the exhibition digital. So originally the project had aimed to create a touring temporary exhibition, a very physical exhibition, and one of the things we were really impressed with when we deciding which artists to work with was Mel and Morgan’s approach and idea about created a tent I which to immerse yourself and explore the six different lives that had been selected. How did you both feel about the transference to digital and how do you feel about it now. Obviously it came about as a result of the lockdown and the covid pandemic situation we still find ourselves in today. How has working digitally been for you?

Mel: Shall I go first? I still miss our tent, I have to say, I do feel a bit sad that that was never possible for us to create that because it was going to be a different kind of feeling. However, I have to say that having gone down this digital route I am quite happy in terms of the exhibition being on what I consider now to be a much wider platform, so I think widening access to the stories that we’re exploring in the exhibition is something that was not necessarily going to be possible with the physical touring exhibition, so in that way I think the message is reaching a broader audience which can only really be a positive thing. In practical terms we did have to adapt things as we went and that in some ways was really interesting because we were able to sort of work with, work visually... with some of the things that were available and there were thing that were not available. In the current scenario we couldn’t access the catalogues of some sites or we could only access partial catalogues, so it was really interesting to work within those parameters. I think overall it has been quite a positive thing.

Morgan: Yeah, Mel has been really comprehensive there I have just got two brief things. One is just a story really that of course part of the intention behind a bender style tent is thinking about an object that immediately connotes transience and impermanence in a very powerful way. You know I live in Bristol and all through the last 6 months there are lots of conversations happening because there is a big van swelling community here, there’s a big Roma community here and so there are lots of conversations about housing and residence and how community and identify are interconnected with those things and interconnected with human rights. And interestingly in one of the interviews, Frankie, who comments on Stephen Barry’s life. He was descended from Northern Irish who settled in Liverpool and in his living history he can remember people living in dig outs and in bender tents and interestingly our tent still figures in audio form and drawn out through lived experience of somebody reflecting on a life two generations previous with a lot of interconnections and so there is a lot of food for thought there I think. And in terms of Google Arts and Culture I mean strategically that has worked out as a brilliant thing. The Workhouse Network should be respected as a body of research teams, as a really interesting, stimulating and very relevant conglomeration of very skilled people exploring social history in the past with a lot of relevance to today. I think it is a very positive that it is on Google Arts and Culture, not only in terms of audience research but in terms of legitimising the stories and experience of these people on a more acknowledged level.

Actually, these things work out mercurially but often in a very beneficial way and that's down to the huge, as Mel said earlier, Mel and I are literally at the end of this incredibly deep, well-considered engagement process. Engagement with the research material but also collaborative effort and we are the little communicative bridge at the end of it but it is a collaboration between everybody involved and all the people who have reflected on the stories, presented the stories and been within the research teams so yeah we're really grateful and really happy to have collaborated with everybody on the project.

Megan: So following on from that then, obviously a lot of your work was working directly with our volunteers and I know that you both really enjoyed that part of the process, but there must have been barriers and challenges, there must have been difficulties, especially during the first lockdown. Do you want to talk a little bit about how the experience of working with the volunteers has been?

Mel: Yeah, I actually thought it was fantastic. I mean the volunteers have been so fantastically generous with their time and knowledge and have really provided us with so much help and support in order to actually bring these lives to life and to learn more about the stories and to contextualise it within the site as well, so in Morgan's case she was speaking to volunteers more primarily about the lives and the stories but I was also speaking to some people about sites as well, not being able to visit because that was quite an important aspect for me visually. I don't necessarily think there were, I mean obviously there were challenges in that we couldn't visit the sites because that was going to be ideal and in our original plan Morgan was going to be visiting each of the sites. I mean there were challenges in terms of just very technical things, so I wasn't able to use some photographic things that maybe I might have been able to ...specific things ourselves and I had to do a little bit of, you know second hand research getting to know certain sites initially by looking online, you know there are knock-on effects with that, but it didn't really matter because then I decided that the way they were going to be presented through drawing there weren't then the issues of copyright and not being able to use certain visual material that I could find online. In terms of actually working with the volunteers it was only completely positive, you know everyone was so fantastic and generous and great with the fantastic ideas about the sorts of things I was asking quite weird questions which were helpful to me in kind of coming up with some ideas about how things were but everyone was very generous and kind with their resources that they had available to them.

Morgan: Yeah just to add on to that, total agreement with Mel. Obviously Mel's done an amazing job at making visible things that were invisible and again I think that's really useful for the network because unlike some museums that have, of course there are many, many objects and resources across the workhouse sites, and there are archives but perhaps available in a less obvious form than some other museum, big national museums, that spring to mind. So I think in a way Mel's work also puts together a little bit of a visual archive that is really interesting and it was very much in my mind an interesting thing that this project in itself you know in a hundred years could become something that could be interesting for historians and researchers. So that sort of sparks and all the skill and knowledge that the volunteers possess catalyse this idea of having an audio archive so all of the interviews and conversations, some of which are two hours long, is now archived and hopefully somebody can edit me out because I think it is much more interesting listening to the research material and also through that process it emerged that there is this amazing story – the research story – and so each of the researchers have this very brief that explores how they've got involved in social history which is I think a really important and fascinating aspect of the exhibition. It's not a case of people who are artists coming and slapping their stamp at the end of a project that actually

it's a collaborative endeavour that all of those skills and all of that knowledge is accredited and there's scope to develop those avenues further. There's scope to develop and empower those research teams even more which is a really important and I think unique feature of the Workhouse Network that that is such a core value and that that's been done so well. That's been really exciting, its been really interesting to hear how different people have got involved in social research and share that and encourage more people to get involved.

Megan: Fabulous. Our time with Mel and Morgan is running out but I have one more two-part question to finish on. It's a bit of a tricky one and it is a little bit of an unfair one as well but there it is. What do you think has been your favourite part of working on More Than Oliver Twist and then the second part is do you have a favourite inmate and if so who and why?

Mel: I think for me my favourite part of working on the project has been the element of collaboration between everyone that has worked on the project, the volunteers, Megan, Jan and of course Morgan to create something together. I've really enjoyed that aspect of the project hugely. It does feel a bit unfair to say have you got a favourite inmate. I don't really have a favourite inmate but one thing that I will say the story that touched me the most, perhaps, or I found most sad, was Levi Newham's story. I just at times I felt quite tearful about his story and I think it was just aspects of it that are very sad and I found that one of the more poignant ones. But they are all so fascinating in their own right so I don't think I have a favourite inmate as such....I can't really name a favourite. I like them all really.

Morgan: Ok yeah, so favourite inmate, favourite aspect. Of course the collaboration and learning. I have learnt so much about the origins of social care at a time when during the pandemic I was working as a carer, so that's interesting, I always work in different social care structures and in education in the way that is in tandem with my artistic practice. I really enjoyed finding all the different contemporary voices and sharing the historic material and seeing and hearing their reactions I think is very interesting and it whets my appetite for how the platform will be received generally, especially with working people, with working communities. I think there is often an assumption that people who don't have educational or formal educational training at a certain level, academic training, will therefore not understand life and I think it will reveal that people have extraordinarily insightful and perceptive responses to the historic material that will in turn reflect back some interesting things on how we can move forward with presenting that material and exploring that material. In terms of my favourite story, I'm with Mel it is really difficult to pick but Harriet Perkins' life really touched me because talking to Linda who is the great, great maybe great grand-daughter of Harriet Perkins and to have that very tangible, familial connection was very, very moving and listening to what that meant to the family and to think about that family research was really very moving and to then see a photograph of this lady whose life I had heard all about and the research volunteers had explored the archive to then be able to share this photograph of this incredibly strong, resilient, wonderfully impressive woman was very moving and very impactful.

Megan: Thank you both very much, Your contribution to More Than Oliver Twist has been absolutely amazing you've gone above and beyond and really inspired us to want to do more and to find out more and to interpret it to a wider audience. I thank you for your flexibility and adaptability and collaboration because like Mel said it really has been a massive collaboration and the project is really a celebration of all of our efforts I think and that's amazing but we obviously couldn't have done it without our two wonderful artists Mel and Morgan so thank you very much.