

Artsbank Meets... Dust Rising

Video Interview Transcript (2 December 2019)

<https://artsbank.org.uk/artsbank-meets-dust-rising/>

Interview with Joyce Iwaszko, Kornelia Hems and Terry Shave

J - My name is Joyce Iwaszko, I'm one of the artists, curators and directors of Dust Rising.

K - My name is Kornelia Herms and I'm also one of the artists, curators and directors.

T - My name is Terry Shave, I'm an artist and curator and director of Dust Rising too.

(Music)

What is Dust Rising?

J - Dust Rising is an artist led visual arts organisation based in Stoke-on-Trent.

K - We are a community interest organisation and we organise exhibitions around Stoke.

T - Our remit is to put high quality arts exhibitions on in the city. Not only to promote what we do in the city but to promote the individual artist as well.

(Music)

How did Dust Rising begin?

J - Dust Rising began as part of a series of exhibitions that I initiated and curated with Andy Cooke. Originally to start to promote the city of culture bid 2021. That was then developed into Dust Rising. The Dust Exhibitions - For that we put on six exhibitions across Stoke-on-Trent, in all the different towns and then that continued on to Dust Rising where we put an exhibition on in Hanley last year and then DR19, which took place at Spode in Stoke in 2019.

(Music)

Why is it important to make this happen in Stoke-on-Trent?

The reason for creating Dust and Dust Rising was because we felt there was a gap on what art and culture offer was available to participants and audience in Stoke-on-Trent. And to bring more visual arts to the area because there seemed to be a little gap that appeared there and that's our main interest I think as a group.

(Music)

Tell us about the places and venues you have created exhibitions in

J - As I say, we started as Dust Exhibitions and we went to all the towns in Stoke-on-Trent and we looked for buildings that were may be of interest, of heritage interest, of interest to artists. We took the exhibition to Longton Town Hall, to the Wedgwood Institute in Burslem, Fenton Library and Tunstall Baths. So each of those building were of some significant interest to the people in Stoke-on-Trent and that encouraged, hopefully encouraged people to come so, not only to see the artwork, but probably to see the buildings as well which was quite a nice part of that.

T - I think that's the really significant thing, that it gives a real opportunity for artists to respond to a place and make some new work but it also shows that you don't need prestigious art galleries to put in contemporary work. In fact, it really is a great way to bring in people who are not threatened by those types of environment and to bring them in to see contemporary work and we're really pushing that strongly I think, to help to build audiences for individual artists. You know, we have a university producing visual artists here every year and they don't really have huge opportunities after graduating to show work and we really want to promote that too.

J - Previously we'd had in-kind support by Stoke-on-Trent City Council by the access to use the buildings that we used, which also included Hanley Town Hall and the Victoria Hall and some of those spaces. So Stoke-on-Trent Council have supported us right from the beginning by the in-kind access to the buildings, which was really good.

T - And being quite strategic about it, working to what the city itself needs, looking at gaps where we think we could fill things that don't currently go on and my first involvement was putting some work in the town hall in Hanley in 2018 and that is a real opportunity to introduce new venues but also to actually say there's a group of artists out there working seriously in the city, about the city.

(Music)

How have you been working with visual arts graduates?

K - With DR19 we also invited graduates to take part, which was quite successful. They felt more confident after being in the show as well.

T - Yeah we didn't pick them out and identify them as graduates. We invited them to be a part of a group of artists exhibiting and they were very grateful that they didn't get pointed at you know, because they're just one of the professional artists in the city now and they really appreciated being highlighted because of that.

J - That was a huge opportunity for them to be a part of an ongoing, artist-led series of exhibitions so they got a lot from that. Both from being a part of the exhibition and the discussion and the developments they made from being a part of DR19.

K - So as a result we will definitely continue with that again with future ones.

T - One of them has already set up an initiative in Longton since the exhibition anyway. So it just gives people that sort of impetus really to do more.

(Music)

How do you decide a theme for your exhibitions?

J - Each of exhibitions has a loose theme as such. The first Dust Exhibitions were based on the colours that we used for the promotional material and that's quite a colour link to the city and the different towns within the city. Then since that, Dust Rising is maybe more about the buildings and what goes on in those buildings and artists could respond to the buildings or heritage and the actual current use of the buildings was taken into account and then DR19 was really then connected to our interest in architecture, heritage, the buildings and how visual artists might respond to that. So yes each one has a theme and will continue to have but a very loose themes so in the widest possible sense, in order to get the best and the most interesting work and response from visual artists.

T - I think as an organisation too you recognise that working in partnership with others is really

important and we discuss with the North Staffordshire Society of Architects, to be involved in a project with us so that helped us think about the locations being the subject. But also the fact that we were exhibiting in Spode this year at the same time as the British Ceramics Biennial so those synchronicities, those things going on, really helped to focus what we were doing but also, like Joyce said, you don't want it to be so specific that the artists can't use it in their way to follow their track as well answering the brief.

(Music)

Tell us about the team and how your work together

T - This is always a difficult one, I think we work really well as a team but there are moments when I've found myself just scraping paint of a window because I could do that and Kornelia ended up doing all the budgets because she's really good at that and I think you evolve as a team.

K - I did loads of mopping as well.

T - Oh you did lots of mopping, that's true. But I think Joyce has the contacts because of the past and so it sort of falls into place that we all have roles in it.

K - We all introduce ourselves as artists, curators and directors but actually when it comes to doing it, we divide the roles sometimes. We share tasks and we also divide tasks when we need to.

T - So there were things like, because I've done quite a number of site specific things in other cities, I did some training of the invigilators to help and health and safety stuff you know so those things fall into place. I think the biggest test for us was doing the bid for the Arts Council. We sat for ages and it's crucial that you have a group of people that can think on their feet but can take a problem away and then come back together a week later and write it up and I think we did that and got money this time and in the end having just done our evaluation of the last project, it's been a real pleasure to work with people where you have that same aim but you know you can contribute something different to the group as well. I'd say that to any new organisation you know. Just think of the make-up of what you've got there and be quite critical of saying someone's got to that, someone's got to that and if you can't do it, find someone who can help you to do it.

K - I think that's important to mention that artists, not only us are making it happen, but artists who are taking part in the exhibitions....

T - Yeah associate artists.

K -have a big role in making it happen. They share tasks as well with us.

T - But we've been adamant all the way through that we are an artist-led organisation that wants to promote the artist as well as the artwork in the city and I think for us that's key, that we make, we do the artwork as well as just manage the organisation.

J - Because we don't really have what people might see as a traditional curator or directorial within our CIC. I think that we all work together and we have different roles within it but if someone doesn't want to do something or maybe hasn't got that skill, the other person or one of the other people will cover that. So we work really well together as a team but not necessarily in the traditional way that people might think.

K - Although saying that, if you ask them, I would produce a file for anything that would be a problem. A document or a calendar or a spreadsheet.

T - Yeah you need someone who can actually do that side of it as well. But I think when you develop an organisation, you know most of these don't appear out of the blue, they have history

you know. You had history in the city, I had history working in other organisations and universities so you bring those things to it. It's not starting from scratch but being straight. If you don't know how to do it, you have to go and find someone.

(Music)

Why did you decide to set Dust Rising up as a community interest company (CIC)?

J - Setting up the CIC was for us a bit of a challenge because none of us had really that much experience in that so we actually went to Vast and got some information from them and then we looked through the information that we had to provide and what we needed to do and then that was how then we set that up. So the CIC was quite challenging and I think if anyone's thinking about doing that, you do need to take a little bit of advice maybe and we did seek that advice because we didn't have that experience.

K - It's a lot of reading to do and also we had at some point we had a choice whether we want to be a charity organisation or a community interest organisation and there's differences between the two as well, which we kind of had to tackle and figure out which one we fit in better.

T - But I think it also signals, because you're registered at Companies House, you have to unlock your accounts, that you're not casual. You become a serious organisation and you have a commitment, your aims and objectives which are set out in Companies House and I think that was important for us, that we're not saying we're just doing a few projects here. We are actually doing something which is about a long-term commitment.

(Music)

What's the process of planning a Dust Rising project?

T - Evaluating what we've done and then projecting that forward is really the most important thing I think and doing audience feedback, that's been terrific for us. It seems a laborious process to ask people to fill in cards or do interviews with them but that's really helped and I think that's the important thing, that you build on the expertise. I think the premise is that you get a grand scenario and then you work it down to earth don't you so it becomes viable then.

K - So it's basically a fluid process and it changes along the way as well.

T - Yes don't be afraid of the change.

K - It depends you know whether the project we're planning is bigger or smaller. The time frames might be different. We need to figure out a theme, well we don't need to as Joyce said before we tend to.

J - We like to have a starting point I suppose but again can't stress the importance of being a very loose... Also going back to planning of the project, the timing of the project has been thought about in the context of the other things that are happening in Stoke-on-Trent around the different times of the year. So we looked at that quite closely to find when different things were on and how we might enhance the offer of art and culture within the city. So finding out what else is on and where we might fit into that timeline and then working back to try and get funding so we can offer what we wanted to offer.

(Music)

How have you funded your projects?

J - Initially the funding for the Dust Exhibitions were self funded so they were artist-funded. There was some in-kind from Stoke-on-Trent City Council and as we built our relationship with them, we did get a small amount of funding from Stoke-on-Trent Council but it was initially self funded and artist-led funded and then as we've gone on and we've obviously started the CIC and then reapplied as DR19, not only did we have Stoke-on-Trent City Council funding and access to buildings but also along with some initial monetary funding, Arts Council funding so we were Arts Council funded this time as well for DR19, which was really nice to get. So we could actually pay artists a reasonable fee, which we hadn't really been able to do so we were relying on their goodwill so for DR19 we were actually allowed to offer commissions and pay artists, which was lovely.

T - And we also put into the bid, and were successful, to actually pay people to invigilate so asking them to be proactive wasn't something you would necessarily think of when they're volunteers but to actually say you're doing this. Wasn't a huge amount of money but I think the idea that artists would do it for nothing when they're very poor anyway, is not a way we should be going forward.

(Music)

How do you reach your audiences?

K - Marketing is a big thing actually.

J - I think Marketing has become a much bigger thing than we initially thought, much larger. Things like social media has even in the last five years has become huge. So for us, that's a new challenge because we have to then go out and find if we can get any help with that and where we might get that so social media and marketing has been something that we're working on currently as a big challenge.

T - Certainly in terms of the discussion around it, the idea of reach and how far you've got out there is so key to it now. Particularly of an organisation that's going to carry on doing projects. You want your name to be out there as much as the project you're currently doing so I think it's really important that you... with this, it's one of our big things that we're planning at the moment about how we have a marketing strategy and we don't have those skills so we have to be looking for those skills and support from somewhere and getting funds to pay that.

K - Obviously leaflets and flyers are the obvious things to do but social media, which I think we did quite well but we have actually figured out that through DR19, that we need some more help with that because it's quite a big task basically.

T - I think the important thing about partnerships that can't be overstated, that the fact that we worked with BCB and they were on and we were on and that we shared audiences. Some came to us and then went on to them and came to us from them and that was really key because we could use that and what we wouldn't have necessarily got here is the type of international audience that the British Ceramics Biennial would and they came in were really interested and are now following us on social media so it really pays off.

(Music)

What's been the biggest challenge making your projects happen?

J - I think one of the biggest challenges is really to try and get audience and participants to come. How do you get people to come to see shows and the funding to put the exhibition and the events and workshops on.

T - I've described Stoke before as a slow city, in the best sense of the slow movement that it's here, you've just got to make sure people know about it and actually get it out there and it is quite difficult. I think one of the really successful things about the Dust series and DR19 is the fact that we're in none-threatening buildings. They're not prestigious cultural buildings which people might be a little bit frightened of and also we're working with organisations to bring people in so we're working with other community organisations. The West End Centre down in Stoke we worked with this year for DR19, which allowed us to go to them as well as them coming to us which I think is really important.

K - When it comes to the audience it's...just an example when I talk to local people, some people still are not aware of British Ceramic Biennial being on as well and that's quite a big event which makes us think well how many people know about Dust Rising you know, we're only smaller. So yeah I think bringing audiences is the biggest challenge and social media and marketing is a big help.

T - One of the things we did a workshop day about using venues and about doing the type of project we were doing and one of the things we underestimate too is how difficult it often is just for people to get about the city. So transport strategies and things like that become really important to organisations like us because you got to get an audience there and if they can't get there immediately, then maybe they decide not to go so that is really key I think, putting exhibitions on where people can get to particularly on public transport is really important.

(Music)

What's your top tip for making 'site-specific' projects?

T - Give it plenty of time because there is a lot of things you have to do in terms of health and safety. Working with partners because we worked with the city council for the Spode site and you've worked with the City Council across the city. Make sure you know how you can manage that site for health and safety and also that the artists can actually come in and use the resource of the site as well, is really key. For example at DR19, quite a number of us actually found materials there we use so it's good to actually be working with people on the site as well. They were great at Spode, allowing us to do that.

K - I'd say consider practical things as well like the cold in the buildings, the damp at some point we had some leakage in the building and we had to deal with that.

K – Damp, damp.

T - But that's interesting because going into buildings where people think nothing could ever happen in there and certainly Spode, people came along and said 'Oh this is amazing here isn't it?' and I think sometimes we don't know what we've got in the city until you can show people, damp or not.

J - Just to add to that really about site specific or site related exhibitions and how the artists respond to that is really important for us because that's how you get the most exciting creative work because, if you as an artist have to respond to either a building or a specific area or something that's happening within that, then access to that building or access to that space is really important and that you feel safe and comfortable and you think that's it's something you can create artwork in response to that.

K - Which was really great at Spode actually because of the security there at other events happening like BCB.

(Music)

What one piece of advice would you give to those wanting to make cultural events happen in their community?

J - Attain perseverance, persistence and determination that your project or whatever you want to do will happen, no matter what stands in your way because there will be lots of things that will get in the way so I think for me those were the things. So determination, persistence and perseverance.

T - And remember you're not on your own, there'll be other organisations out there that have done it before and those partnerships are really key. Don't give up.

K - That's what I would say, I would say look for help with others as well because you are not on your own and you know, there might be things that will be difficult for you to find out on your own so maybe try to look for help from others.

J- And actually have a team of people that you know that you feel confident and you can rely on them and be part of a team to deliver something because you can't do it on your own. You do need those partnerships both large partnerships and small partnerships.

K - And also it's a lot more fun when you do it with others.

T - Yeah don't write out the fun, please don't write out the fun.