

Hello and welcome to the second episode of OUTPUT gallery's podcast. We started with an origin story episode but if you missed that, all you need to know is that OUTPUT gallery is a small space in Liverpool City Centre, opened in April 2018. OUTPUT Gallery works exclusively with creatives from or based in Merseyside, it has a high turnover of exhibitions and it aims to support its local art scene and raise the profile of all the people who make it so great.

My name is Gabrielle de la Puente and I run the space, and I've started this podcast series in response to lockdown and this weird time afterwards where lockdown has technically been lifted but we know so many people are still shielding and won't be making it down to exhibitions and events in the way they normally would. This podcast series is an attempt to allow people to engage with exhibitions and artist's ideas from afar. Going forward we will be publishing interviews with artists on their work, their show at OUTPUT, maybe some behind the scenes processes and inspirations, and their experience of being a part of our local art scene.

One of the only exhibitions we were able to complete on our current arts council funded programme before lockdown hit was a solo show by Joseph Cotgrave, an artist from and based on the Wirral. I've been aware of Joe's work long before OUTPUT ever began and we've actually worked together on two different exhibitions. Joe was part of a group show last year, the OUTPUT Open 3, and also he did the solo I mentioned that took place across the end of February and beginning of March this year. So, welcome, Joe!

Hello!

Before we even get into the art talk, how has lockdown been for you? How are you?

It's been weird. Coming off the back of the solo show and then having to go into lockdown, and not be able to have access to a studio, has really changed my work. Mentally it's been exhausting, even though I've not been doing anything... I think that's why it's been exhausting. It's weird. I still think, how did all this happen? It feels like a dream every day. What about you?

It has been weird. Now that the gallery is opening and I'm trying to get back into OUTPUT gallery mode, starting this podcast, it feels like the whole thing has just began and I'm trying to figure out from scratch how I did so much work. That's the big thing, I don't know how I ever did so much.

I think in lockdown we all stopped and had to deal with stuff at face value. For my mental health it has been quite good in terms of being able to just stop and be like, lets just focus on you. But in terms of work ethic, I have completely lost my work ethic. I'm like, how do I even get that back? I

guess that's why I'm going into teaching in September. I'm doing a bit of a side step from the arts, because I don't think the arts necessarily dealt with lockdown in the best way possible. I was awarded arts council funding which was great but it didn't really go very far and I feel like now lockdown's been lifted, I'm back at square one. I work freelance for myself and there's literally not one single job coming in. So I think being able to take a little side step and specialise in product design, which is something a bit different, and teaching, will hopefully give me that work ethic back. I am really struggling even to go the studio and stuff, I don't know what I'm doing here, why am I making work when... it's really confusing.

It's hard to remember the value of everything and I think that the money side of all of this has made people realise how tenuous its always been. What I see artists doing who are completely freelance, or who do this on top of another job, is try and capture all these separate pots of a few hundred pounds provided by different jobs. And you can't survive off that. So much more time and labour and materials goes into what you're getting remunerated from these different freelance jobs. I think the people who are in better positions are the curators, people in salaried positions especially, they've got the benefits, people who are attached to NPOs. Everyone else is like - how are we going to survive?

I've been surviving, not thriving, for so long now. I finished my masters three years ago and everything's constantly been a struggle, and lockdown has made me realise, not "what's the point" because I'm always going to do art somewhere but it proved what I already knew, the precarity of the arts. I think if some people from those salaried positions gave a little percentage to the artists and didn't take as big of a figure then it would ease this whole thing. At the end of the day if a lot of people stop making art, they're not going to be in a job!

Yeah, those curators wouldn't have a job. I think about that quite a lot, its crazy that the art world relies so much on talent but the people in the best paid positions don't have the talent. They're not the ones coming up with the ideas, they've inherited someone else's job and they're just doing some admin. It's crazy.

It is crazy because you just think, maybe we all just need to stop making art, and just be like, nah! Take a bit of a cut out of your wage. Maybe there needs to be something, this idea of lone artists, maybe that needs to be re-evaluated and galleries need to start providing more for the artist in terms of correct training, getting funding in for local artists...

I think people need to be put on a wage or a universal basic income, in places like Norway you can apply for an artists's salary or an artists;'s wage and I think it works out as 26,000 Euros is the maximum per year which is only about half the average salary in Oslo.It isn't perfect but imagine if you could get that much a year!

If I could get £200 a month guaranteed...

It would be amazing and it doesn't seem impossible, there could be a way to redistribute the wealth and make this happen. But there would always be people who got it and who didn't get it, so maybe that would be the problem, the gate keeping of that. It would go so far towards creating a better culture and better mental health in the arts.

I think that is why I'm taking that step, I'm not saying that teaching product design is going to be a forever thing for me. But just to be able to take a bit of a side step, and I know quite a few people are doing the same because this has proven that we are becoming disposable as artists, in the gallery sphere. I don't know how we've come to that.

I don't know either. It's mad. As you were talking then, I was thinking. It's not that you are going to stop making art but maybe when you go to the studio, the art that you make isn't going to have the same career-based pressure on it. You're not going to make work as a career artist but it will be the work you want to make and maybe it will bring some of the joy back into it.

I think that is what I've begun to realise. I was only exhibiting when I was getting paid and it used to be fun. I still love making and producing work but it had become a bit like the fun was taken out of it, it had become almost like a job. Which I know it is, but when it isn't a sustainable job, then...

It feels very different. Speaking of bringing joy back into the process of making art which I'm sure you had when you were very young, and not beaten down by the art world, what was your relationship like with art and creativity when you were in school? I know that you went on to do fine art degrees at BA and MA - was that comfortable, was that an easy decision to make?

Yeah, it felt very natural for me, art for me was always escapism when I was going through stuff when I was younger. It allowed me to go and switch off. I was always colouring in or doodling or painting. I think that's what I've lost, that idea of escaping through my work. It hasn't felt as fun. It was a natural decision for me to go from A-level to a foundation course at LCC...

What was that like?

It was amazing, I absolutely loved foundation. Hopefully, fingers crossed, I'm going to get a placement in LCC teaching product design, which spills into the foundation course. It would be really nice for me to go back there and visit, it was such a fun time and it felt like the options were endless. Someone should have told me at that time, it's going to be really shit!

What was it like between foundation and your BA course? What did you go on to do?

BA was weird, it was like a wake up call. You're very much on your own on an art BA, you go there and you take what you want out of it. So it did take me quite a while to begin to think as an artist, and to transition from studying to working in a classroom, to then having a studio based practice, which was so different.

What were you making?

It's so weird, over lockdown I've started drawing again. I used to always be like a draughtsman or whatever, someone who draws. I was always doing portraits and stuff. Then I went to my BA thinking I was a portrait painter and they just bash it of you. Which was good, because compared to the sculpture that I make now, it's so different. But all the portraits were all driven around narrative and my practice is still the same, it's always driven around a narrative or a memory. But it's just in a different medium.

What was your degree show like, what were you making?

It was based on memories of my Dad, who is a painter and decorator. I went into painting in the expanded field and recreated these memories, it was an installation, my first ever installation. I was using painting and sculpture in a way that created an immersive experience.

What did you write your dissertation on?

I think it was painting in the expanded field, it was looking at how painting is so dominated by cis, straight men and the problems with that and the reason I wanted to move away from that. I talked about my experiences as a gay man and stuff like that.

When you studied in Leeds, did you move right back to Merseyside?

Yeah. It was either stay in the bar job I was working in and carry on pretending I was a student or move back home, live on the Wirral and do my masters, so I went for the masters. I did it part time because I was at the time a voluntary director at the Royal Standard which was almost like two masters. One in admin and the real art world, and one in critique and practice based stuff.

How was it going straight from BA to MA?

For me, I didn't necessarily enjoy the masters. I weren't in the head space to experience it, maybe if I would have waited longer I would have appreciated it more. Once I finished in third year of my

degree I was just ready, I didn't want to stop making and it felt like a masters gave me the right support to carry on making. That's kind of why I went for it. Also I was diagnosed HIV positive while I was studying in Leeds. Towards the end of third year I started doing loads of research, into the history of AIDS and HIV and how that can be brought into my work. Because of where I was already at in terms of handing in work for my final mark on my degree it was too late to submit all that research. A masters was a way of carrying on and it really switched my practice up. Masters was the point where I became more aware of politics in the arts and why I wanted to produce work about HIV and stuff like that.

When that conversation and research was brought into your work, what did it look like? How did the work change?

It was still using the same materials as I was using towards the end of third year but it was becoming, I would say, a bit more experimental. I started using sound and started using a lot of materials which were representative of spaces. So shimmer curtains from clubs, or tiles from bathroom saunas. So it did shift quite a bit and the work become quite clinical, at that point as well I had just started meds to be undetectable so I was visiting the hospital quite a bit and that shifted my work. You can see that transition.

I know that doing the MA course at LJMU you don't have a studio do you, so you had one at the Royal Standard?

Yeah, there was a bit of space provided but it was nothing to rave about. The space that was provided was just wall space so I couldn't make the work that I wanted to make there, basically. So I had a studio at the Royal Standard. I think if I had just stayed within the realms of uni I wouldn't have experienced what an actual studio practice is like.

And what was that like?

It was nice, it was nice to take a step into a community of different artists. I had my own routine, I was never really in uni to be honest, I was only there once a week and everyone else was there five days a week in the studio. I quite enjoyed how it felt like being able to step outside of uni but still have that critique and support from the course, it was really beneficial.

Were you able to use workshops at the University? Is that something that you rely on, did you make much use of them or were you just making stuff you could produce in the studio?

Yeah, stuff I could produce in the studio. I felt like the workshop in uni was very- like, you can't make this, you can't cut wood. So it was like, OK, I'll just go and do it in my studio, do you know what I mean?

Why was that?

Health and safety in that bloody building is ridiculous. You know the John Lennon building? It's just terrible, it's not a building where you can make art.

Interesting.

I think it's catered more towards architecture, fashion, graphics. I wasn't even allowed to put a light bulb in without having a technician there. One time I got into a bit of a mood because he was really rude, but that's another story. I couldn't even drill into the wall and I was just like, how can I make work, then? It was ridiculous, I do think that's an issue in a lot of unis.

So when did you start to exhibit? When was the moment you went from art student and someone who had a studio practice to someone who was putting work in exhibitions in different places?

I'd say my first proper exhibition felt like in second year when I did a project with Ben Judd, who is a sound artist. We got the chance to go down to London for a lot of site visits and then in the end a group of students who signed up to the project were able to exhibit down there and put on our own exhibition. So that was in second year of uni and I then carried that on with one of my peers, Pippa Eason. We always used to exhibit constantly through an organisation in Leeds which uses empty buildings. We were getting a lot of empty buildings and setting them up for an opening and just having these pop-up shows across the city, which we were doing separate to the uni course. It felt like probably second year in the degree, uni felt for me very boxed in. So I wanted to do stuff beyond it to test the waters.

Did you enjoy exhibiting? I know it seems like an obvious question but a lot of artists I speak to, it's not necessarily for an exhibition outcome, it's for something else.

Yeah, I definitely feel that my practice really thrives when I'm exhibiting and in that mind-frame of utilising a different space. I think my practice is curatorial, as well. How I set the work up and think about an audience's experience.

Cool - and then, you've been part of two exhibitions at OUTPUT. One of them was the group show last year and one was a solo exhibition earlier this year. Can you tell me about the work you put in the group show?

It was really nice to be exhibiting back on the Wirral, especially in Make, that feels like a step in the right direction because there hasn't really been much happening over here compared to Liverpool. So that was really nice. And the work, I think the solo show was an extension of the work from the group exhibition. It was a tiled piece, set up to look like a sexual act had happened. And the solo show was a bigger version of that, it was like a grotty club with a smoke machine and vodka red bull on the floor.

So the group show was ten different artists, and OUTPUT usually works with people from or based in Merseyside as a whole, in its Liverpool space. But every so often OUTPUT will partner up with different organisations, partly because we need match funding to get arts council bids through the door, but its also in the interest of expanding the audience and seeing what its like to work with organisations that are much better resourced than we are. Make Liverpool is one of those organisations that we partnered up with last year, What we decided to do in the end was have an exhibition in their new space in Hamilton Square, as it was just about to open. Instead of the whole Merseyside remit, we changed it just to artists from or based on the Wirral. Joe was one of the ten artists that showed in their new space, which I think is going to be studios and a cafe. I think partly your work in that group show is why I thought we should work on a bigger solo exhibition when the next arts council programme had started. Just for anyone who maybe hasn't seen any photos or maybe they haven't visited the show, what was it like to walk into the space? Because it was quite a lot take in.

It was based on the idea of recreating a club so if you can imagine a club which is empty, and that feeling in a club when you're dancing and the lights come on and you're like oh my god, I need to go home. It felt a bit like that. We mopped the floor with vodka red bull and we had a smoke machine, there were so many different micro elements that impacted how you felt in the space and how you reacted to the work. The smoke machine was great because it made the lights blurry, and then you would walk across the floor and your feet would stick, so it felt again like you were in a club and you would get a sense of vodka red bull. There was a soundtrack which alternated between the two speakers in the space. Obviously I had to use Cher because like, who doesn't love Cher? So I used Cher in the background and then had subs - like, doosh doosh doosh noises - to make it feel like at different points a door was being shut in the space, so the sound become muffled at certain points. I also had drips in the soundscape, so it felt like someone was sweating and weird gasps as if someone was dancing.

And the Grindr notification sound?

Yeah, so the Grindr noise, which is like a specific - do-do-doo! That played throughout the track which was really funny because I could tell some people on their faces were like, is that mine? It was enjoyable to see people thinking it was their phone.

Wasn't that element because something happened to you in Marks and Spencer's...

Yeah, someone that I know had gone into Marks and Spencer's, and they were shopping, and their Grindr got a notification, and some woman was with her little son, a toddler, and he went Mummy, that sounds like Daddy's phone! That story just makes me laugh, it's such like... it doesn't sound like an iMessage or a Whatsapp notification, it's quite telling, the noise. That's why I put it in, that story was just, oh my god.

And then there were sculptures as well?

A lot of the sculptures were sex toys that I'd casted, a lot of them were like pills that I take to remain undetectable. By me taking these pills I become undetectable which means I can't pass my HIV diagnosis on to anyone. So they were spread throughout the space, some of them were crushed on the floor, so the audience would stand on and crush them. Then I also cast little gas canisters, because there's so many in town. I feel like in 200 years time they will be part of the earth, those little canisters. Especially round OUTPUT because it's by concert square, there's just loads. So they were casts, and the reason for me wanting to do this idea of a club was because the year before I had lost my sister. By using Cher it was quite celebratory, but then also my work is beginning to shift into a different direction. It doesn't always necessarily need me giving all the information to everyone about HIV. I based this installation in particular on the Navy Bar in Liverpool because I haven't been back to that space since I caught HIV, from sleeping with someone from there. It felt - I don't know if cathartic is the right word but it felt important for me to make this piece of work and having a solo show in OUTPUT was the first opportunity I had since I started thinking about this work to be able to give birth to it and see it in its full capacity. So yeah, it felt like I was letting go of the death of my sister, because it was the first piece I'd made since that, and also my old self - how I used to be, going out all the time and taking party drugs and stuff like that. It was really nice to be able to do it.

Yeah, I was just about to say. The press release said - "after losing his sister last year, the artist experienced grief similar to how he felt after his HIV diagnosis. 'I felt like a lost the person I was before that moment, I had to re-learn something. The same thing happened with my sister.' The artist aims to build an environment and atmosphere reminiscent of nights out in Liverpool when he may have contracted HIV, viewing the exhibition as a shrine to his past self.' Then there was a review that had gone up on Messy Lines' website, I'll just read a quote from that as well: "There's a phrase use in the notes that Cotgrave has constructed this exhibition as a shrine to his past self. It's an interesting phrase, and how it's executed is central to the success of the whole project. Because successful de-stigmatization depends on reining in judgement, even of oneself. Casting the spectre of HIV as moral rather than medical has had devastating consequences for decades, contributing to the deaths of hundreds

and thousands of people who might have survived had drug research been swifter and better funded.' And I know that you have spoken about that, in terms of the pandemic as well?

Yeah, so I done some stuff with Homotopia over lockdown, which was - I paired up with John Hanning who was a sex worker back in the 80s and was diagnosed with AIDS and told he had six months to live, and he's survived AIDS, that's what his work is about. So we were looking at the similarities to this pandemic, and how quickly it's been dealt with. If we look at the pandemic of AIDS, 40 million have died of AIDS. It's interesting to think, because AIDS at that time, when we look back, was a "gay cancer", that's what they called it - like, it only affects gay people so we don't have to deal with it. But because covid affected everyone it was dealt with in a totally different way. I know they're not comparable in terms of how each illness is contracted, because one's respiratory and one is bodily fluids, which is totally different. But nobody knew when AIDS first come about that it weren't respiratory. So that's what me and John were talking about and we also talked about how the idea of lockdown and isolation can be really detrimental to mental health. That was quite early on in lockdown, I think we filmed it at the beginning of May.

So what did you make together - was it a film?

Yeah, we zoomed each other basically and it was like a Q and A. We got loads of questions from social media. That is up on Homotopia's youtube channel.

Perfect. I think it is comparable - I know you said that they come about in two seperate ways but it has been very enlightening to see how much has been dealt with so quickly over the pandemic, homelessness for example, that they can just fix if they want to. And they decide to go back on it.

Yeah. I think that's the thing, it comes from this cis, straight world that we live in, how society is tailored towards straight people. It makes things easier for them, so if you're any bit marginalised, you're always on the outskirts and you're always more vulnerable. You're always the one that will be looked after last and this pandemic has definitely proved that, it's been such a huge failure on the government's behalf that so many people have died. If we had gone into lockdown a week earlier the death rates would have been half. As an artist I get really frustrated because I want to produce work about that but at the moment, I think that will come in time but at the moment, I'm still flabberghasted.

It's going to take us a lot of time to process this, for years to come. Not just how it has felt in lockdown but this weird phase afterwards as well, and then the recession that's about to come. This is going to last a while.

Yeah, I think that's like - when I was talking about going into teaching it feels like a safe option to do right now because if we're going into a recession at least I'll have a skill and a form of income from training to be a teacher.

Yeah, 100%, I know so many people who are making the same side step at the moment. It just makes sense. Well, I wish you the best of luck with teaching. Thank you so much for speaking to me.

It's nice, because lockdown happened straight after the show was took down, I haven't had a chance to speak about it to everyone. So it's been really nice.

I think it was a really successful exhibition, but I'm biased. You can see images of Joe's show and get the press release on outputgallery.com and you can follow us on [outputgallery](#) on [instagram](#) and [twitter](#). Where can people find you?

Everyone can find me at josephcotgrave which is just across all social media and my website is attached to my social media, it's josephcotgrave.wix.com or something like that. Also keep an eye out on social media, because I'm going to be releasing some limited edition t-shirts this week, so if you want to support an artist, feel free!

Perfect. Thank you so much for speaking and we will be speaking to the next exhibitor, Lo Tierney on the next episode of the OUTPUT podcast. And thank you to Michael Lacey for our jingle. Bye!

Bye!