

**Welcome to the latest episode of OUTPUT Gallery's podcast. If you aren't familiar with the space all you need to know is that OUTPUT opened in April 2018 with the aim of supporting its local art scene. We're in Liverpool City Centre and we work exclusively with creatives from or based in Merseyside. The space has a pretty high turnover of exhibitions, even now in Corona times. My name is Gabrielle de la Puente and I run the space. I've started this podcast series in response to the pandemic and knowing how many of us still don't quite feel comfortable visiting shows, or how a potential bigger lockdown with bigger restrictions is just around the corner, meaning we can't visit shows at all. So this is a way for people to still engage with exhibitions and artists' ideas from afar, and so going forward, we'll be publishing interviews with our exhibitors on their work, their show at OUTPUT and their feelings about this art scene we're a part of. The next exhibition in OUTPUT's autumn line-up is a solo show by Nick Smith, an artist working in moving image, photography, drawing and publishing. After graduating from the Royal College of Art in 2012, with an MA in photography, he founded Relief Press in 2013, a micro-publishing house that creates artists' and curatorial books, specialising in photography. On his artist practice, Smith writes "my aim is to create evocations that connect the past to the present. My work usually starts with a specific moment of departure and/or arrival, within the realms of publicness, regionality, class, memory and the image." So, welcome, Nick. We've been starting every episode with a bit of a getting-to-know-you. So to start at the beginning, can you tell me what your relationship has been like with art from a young age?**

Hello! My relationship has been a bit- I don't know, it's not been a traditional one, you could say. I had a GCSE A in art, but I failed everything else, so I left school at 17. Then I worked full time for a bit, I was a little bit lost I think. Basically I was getting into trouble with the police and stuff, and my Mum one day frogmarched me to Hugh Baird College in Bootle and made me sign up to a course. Literally, we drove in the car on the way down and she said, you got an A in art, so you can do art.

**That's so funny.**

I started this really low-level GNVQ art course, and I wasn't turning up to that either. What happened was they called my Mum and said they were thinking of kicking me off the course, so - you know what scouse mums are like - she convinced them to put me up a year. So they called her in, going "we're going to kick him off the course," and she walked out the meeting going "they've put you up a year." I don't know what she said to them, it's too basic for him or something. So I did an AVCE, got moved up, and I still wasn't that interested in art, to be honest with you. They invested in this music studio at the same time, so I was studying music technology and art. The thing that got me going was the music technology, so I was learning things like midi, recording drum kits, DJing and all this kind of stuff. Then through that, I became more interested in showing up more. I became interested in art, and what I realised with music was that you learnt it, then you went out and did it. So I learnt what I needed to learn, my thing was DJing, I used to DJ a lot out in bars, mostly in London, when I ended up going to University. Because Liverpool is so rich in museums and galleries, and when you're young you have pockets of mates, don't you? So I had some mates who were like, idiots, and some who were quite clever. My mates who were idiots carried on being idiotic and then my mates who were clever, I could see that they had this really positive future ahead of them. They were all in University of Liverpool and Leeds University and all this, so I was having like, University experience with them going out in Liverpool, it was really cool. I thought, maybe I'd like something like that, but I didn't necessarily want to go to Uni. I never felt academic, or anything like that. There was just something about art, and it kind of grew in me, just through going to the museums. I realised you could be quite academic in that subject and pursue it that way but you could also be really dumb as well. So there was something about that relationship that attracted me to it, that I could be dumb but I could also be clever.

**I love that.**

I could be so dumb I was clever, or so clever I was dumb. There was something about that attracted me.

**So it took the pressure off a bit?**

Yeah, yeah. So for me it was like a cosy institution that was clever but it welcomed my kind of, dumbness.

### **What type of stuff were you making at that point, outside of the DJing?**

I became fascinated with a few different works in the permanent collections in Liverpool. One of them being Cezanne's Gardener in the Tate Liverpool, the other one was the social realistic landscapes in the Walker. I started to redraw these things, as you do as an art student, you sit in the museum and you draw them. I started to mock Cezanne's style, I really liked the viscosity of it, how he made things that were like, quite pretty and bland, very visceral and real. I started to try and copy that. I would just be doing paintings of landscapes and fruit bowls and all that crap but I was doing it in the style of Cezanne. In Hugh Baird they didn't trust us with oil paintings so I had to mix all these different paints to get texture. So it started like that. There was a lady that would come in and visit, a tutor, twice a week. She started showing me a bit of attention and being like, these are really good. She pulled me aside one day and just said, because of these paintings, do you know what a foundation is? I don't know if I did or not. Her name was Melanie- I can't remember her surname. She went, my Dad runs the best foundation in Liverpool, he runs Liverpool Community College foundation. So from mimicking these Cezanne works, I started this mad dialogue with... I guess I was 22, but I still wasn't talking to grown-ups. My conversations were all with older kids and stuff. It was the first time an adult had spoken to me like an adult about something. It was really attractive to me. I was making these paintings, it sounds really odd but I thought art was a historical subject. Even though I knew it was a place where I could be myself more, I thought all artists were dead, to be honest with you, at that stage. I didn't think artists were alive.

### **I was exactly the same - I didn't know what contemporary art meant. I probably knew what the words meant, but not together.**

I thought it was an academic subject, you went and you studied it and you maybe worked in the Tate or something like that, I didn't know what it was. So all my paintings, in art education, were really to do with art history, or a very niche moment in art history. But then I worked in Littlewood's call centre in Crosby at the same time, at night time. We would just do these really stupid things like, me and my mate Mark, we'd make collages of all the shoes in the Littlewood's catalogue and things like that. Just really dumb drawings of each other and things. It was half playing around and half academic, learning little bits and bobs about the history of art. Then partly beginning to slowly introduce my own interests and character into the work very slowly over a period of time.

### **It's really interesting - so you started to feel like it was a way of growing up a bit. I think that point of adults speaking to you on a level around that time of foundation is something that people don't really mention enough. When people in the arts talk about foundations, it's just like... oh it's a really good year where you get to experiment. But it's never so much about that personal growth.**

Yeah exactly. And the foundation at Liverpool Community College was probably the most important year of my life, in terms of figuring out who I was and what art was as well. My Mum was beginning to do quite well in her career around that time as well, so she could afford to take me to London. We'd go to different galleries and I think it was in between Hugh Baird and LCC. We went to the Saatchi Gallery and it wasn't the cheesy thing of this work changed my life or whatever, I didn't think the works were that great. But it was very shocking to me to see that a living artist talking about the society which I lived in, in a modern way. Then stuff started to click and in LCC Foundation, things started happening for me creatively, the floodgates opened and it was like, anything's possible, now.

### **Did you use that foundation as a springboard for a BA or...?**

Yeah it was just more encouragement from adults, again. I guess they saw that I was excited by it and was always trying new things. A couple of them suggested that I should apply to one of the big schools in London. For some reason St Martin's was the school that got mentioned a few times, so I ended up applying and getting in there, which they thought was a really big deal. I sort of knew what it was... but yeah, it was just a very quick three years of my life. All of a sudden I was doing this thing. In a way I didn't have time to think about style or what I was doing, or if I was a painter or a sculptor. I was always quite good with ideas and

talking about ideas and that suits the St Martin's thing doesn't it? I didn't know what part of the course I was on until the first day. There's 2D, 3D and 4D and I ended up doing 4D. I didn't know until the day I enrolled. I had no idea- my portfolio was just full of everything. I was doing 4D and I didn't know what it was. I was like, what's that?

**I knew what it was because I also went to St Martin's but for any listeners, do you want to explain?**

It's basically lens-based media and live art. I feel like it was a programme set up in the legacy of artists like John Latham and the guy that walks and photographs his walks, I forget his name. Richard Long? It's a programme made in this hyper minimal, conceptual shadow. So I went from this super vibrant, colourful course at LCC where anything was possible to like, this zipped up, literary, rule-based programme. It was a big, big contrast, and I went from being a kid that thought anything was possible, because there was no rules, to it being like- oh, they've got rules! It was quite jarring. But I did want that academic thing, because I didn't have any GCSEs or anything, I saw my mates doing so well academically, I thought well now I can absorb myself academically as well. So it was a big contrast. Even though those books that they give you are kind of pointless, I did absorb myself in those books, because I thought why not? I thought, I'll learn something. But that came at a cost, because I feel like it really stifled my creativity during that time. I'm ten years out of that course now, maybe a little more - now I'm glad I did that, but it really - for want a better phrase, cock-blocked my creativity for about seven years. That's how I felt about it, anyway.

**It's so interesting, I feel as though when I speak to people who have gone to St Martin's it's a similar story across the board. Which in a way doesn't add up with the idea I had before I went, it's got such a big reputation of radicalism, maybe it's just who you have as a tutor at that time. For me, I had gone in from a similar background, from Liverpool, someone who really liked painting and by the end of the first year my tutors were just like... please stop painting, please do something more interesting than painting, why are you still painting? I remember saying, to be honest I'm painting because I think what I'm doing is good, and sometimes I can sell them, and then that will be a career. Or I can do commissions. And they were just not interested, it was not a good enough reason to carry on. I lost painting and I've not painted for years and years. The other side of it, it'd be interesting to hear your thoughts about this if you say you're coming out the other end of it and glad that it happened, is the point of going to art school more recently to show you the limits, or the historical constraints, the institutions, how the art world works nowadays, in a know-your-enemy kind of way? So as artists now, we can start to think of new ways of doing things. I think that's where I've landed.**

It's like that saying, you've got to know the rules to break them. I think there's that element of it, that's where they're coming from, in the best version of it. The worst version of it is they just hire people who are like them and it doesn't go anywhere. I'd agree with that and when I say I've come out the other end of that, it's being able to articulate ideas that maybe I wouldn't have been able to articulate before. It's been useful to me in regards to writing my ideas down and being able to figure out what are good ideas and what are bad ideas.

**One question I've asked people on this podcast before is, what did you write your dissertation on? Do you remember?**

My BA or my MA? My BA dissertation was a really bad text about Bergson's concept of duration, and I really didn't understand it and I kind of ham-fisted my way through it, because I thought that was what you were meant to do. You were meant to write about French guys. I completely ballsed it up to be very honest with you. I think that was one of the main things that killed the degree for me in the end. That was the problem for me - why did I feel the need to do that when I could have just written about something I enjoyed, like DJing? The thing I always had in St Martins was that I was DJing with a friend in London. It was when St Martin's was in Soho and we were just always in the record shops in Soho. So the thing that made St Martin's an easy pill to swallow was that I had another life outside the art school. I wasn't really friends with anyone on the course, to be honest, most were too posh for me. That's how I felt at the time, that's just my opinion. I was lucky in that my halls of residence was based by LCC so most of the people I hung round with were graphic design students and stuff, and my mate who I DJed with was doing architecture. So I almost treated it like a job, I'd go there and do my job and then go and come out and do something else.

**And the DJing was the creative stuff, it was flipped.**

Yeah, DJing was where you're as good as the last record you've played. You can't theorise it, you've just got to do it.

**That's really nice. It's obviously also a shame that both of those things couldn't come together in some sense. It's hard because depending on who your tutor is, even if you had brought this into your degree show or your dissertation or your studio practice, you might still not have accepted it. It might not have been enough.**

My first year I just used to cast records, and play the cast of the records, I was doing a lot of sound art stuff. Then they come along and they were like, oh now you've got to read this to understand what you're doing. It just makes everything super dry.

**There must be another way of doing art education. There just has to be - somewhere else in another country that's getting it right. It's a very similar conversation I have with lots of students.**

Maybe they need another pathway, a more interesting one.

**Do you know there's four now?**

What's number four?

**So when I went, there was 2D - basically, paintings flat stuff... that was the pathway I was on. There was 3D for sculpture, 4D, which I always understood as time-based, I don't know why... and all those people had cameras and were a bit cleaner than we were in the studio. Whereas all the painters were a mess. And then there was XD - I'm still not 100% sure, but I think it's public practice, or just cross-disciplinary, a mix of stuff. So they do have four now, I don't know if that's quite solved the problem.**

Probably not. I think they get drier and drier.

**Did you go straight from BA to MA, or did you live in the middle?**

No, I worked full time - I've always worked, throughout my education. I was very fortunate when I went to University because Sefton Council ended up paying my tuition fees for me, back in 2003. One thing I've always been alright at is finding money to do education.

**You need to start spilling those secrets, that's amazing!**

I don't think that exists any more. So I got my degree for free, which was amazing - so there was that as well, I didn't take it too seriously. When it got a bit too much I could sit back and be like, whatever... after that I worked in office jobs as an analyst, that kept me in London. I kept DJing and running nights with my mate who I lived with. We started doing quite well, I started to be able to pay my bills with DJing as well as working. I could pay my bills just with DJing alone at one point. So there was one point when I was thinking, maybe this could be something I could do. Then the London nightclub scene started changing a lot around 2009, 2008. The place where we had a club night closed because they sold the place to build flats, the bar where we had a residency changed the music policy so we got turfed out of there. Then the mate who I did the nights with ended up moving to Beijing to be an architect, so it all imploded. At that time I'd just applied to the Royal College and got in so that was about a three year hiatus from the degree to the MA.

**How did your practice, or the work, change between BA and MA?**

Well I applied to do photography. My theory was that I'd learned how to be quite good conceptually at St Martin's and I wanted to hone in and do something practically. Photography at the time was the best, I felt

the best practical and theoretical course in the country. That's why I wanted to do it, I wanted to build up more of a practical approach to what I was doing. Photography felt like the best combination of theory and practice. I really liked the tutors on the programme and the students they were producing at the time were really interesting. So that was the idea - I didn't quite do as well as I'd wanted to in terms of developing my practice during the MA but what I did learn is how to really establish that practical element of what I did. So even though I wasn't able to get there quite how I wanted to on the programme, I learnt how to do it.

**And you don't have to do everything in the time frame of the course, it can set you up for afterwards.**

Yeah, and you learn mostly from the students, I found. They were much better than I was at having an idea and seeing how they developed it quickly and practically. That was really insightful for me, I learnt a lot from that. In a way that's why you go to art school, really, it's for the other students. That's who I ended up learning from in the end.

**What type of photographers or photography were you interested in at that time?**

I think John Stezaker was very prominent on the programme when I was there, I think he used to be a tutor. He'd left, and even though nobody was working with found images, he was one of the main figures in photography at the time. I was really into that conceptual element like Victor Burgin, I used to really like Braco Dimitrijević and the documentation of conceptual works, that was really interesting to me as well. My tutor was Peter Kennard and his work is something that I've always been interested in. They were the sort of people I was looking at, at the time.

**When you say the documentation of that was interesting to you, what do you mean?**

I was interested in how the image, the documentation of a work could be a work in and of itself. I was interested in how photography is a very neutral way of presenting something. I think you do get photographers who are almost like painters, in how they make images. But the aesthetic element I was interested in was photography being very functional. The way I think about photography is a functional thing rather than an art form. The camera for me is always a tool rather than a medium, and even though that's a big area of discussion and a lot of people disagree with me on that, that's how I've always felt. Sorry I'm going to have to stop...

**The cats in the background are fighting, if any listeners can hear that.**

They've just chosen this moment to go absolutely mental.

**I think this podcast has got a new tradition of some kind of little interruption - like when we recorded an interview with Lo it was their birthday and they'd ordered a McDonald's and it almost arrived and they ran out to answer the door... but it wasn't the McDonald's. So did you find it was like, blasphemy? I don't speak to photographers much, did they think it was wrong to see it as that cut and dried?**

I've never really thought of myself as a photographer. As I say, at the time I wasn't really making much work, to be honest with you. I was doing stuff like curating shows, and I always felt photography was between curating and being an artist. That was something that appealed to me about it. It only really feels like in the last three or four years I've become an artist, I've been comfortable with that title. Through that whole period, it's been a strange trajectory through art education, I feel like I've never had the confidence or the time to build up a practical element to what I do. And that's because of a couple of things, one of them being that I've always worked in "ordinary" jobs outside of art, to support myself living in London for one, and trying to be an artist. But I never felt like an artist during any of that time, but I knew I was learning when I was there. Photography is a medium that's not like painting, where you're either painting every day in the studio or you're not, photography's a medium where you can develop an idea a lot more. Photography, the image happens right at the end. That's not how every photographer works I know but for me, the photography I was making was very research-heavy and then the photograph happened right at the very end. It was almost like

the photograph was just proof that I had this idea, in a way. That's how it was going for me, then. The language and theory around it appealed to me, the tutors around it. The difference between St Martin's and the RCA was I really got on with the students a lot more, it felt like I was much more part of a community. It felt a lot more like a meritocracy, like everyone was there on their own merits. So even though I wasn't making a lot of work, maybe I was good in a crit, or I was good for this, or whatever. So that was my experience with photography.

**That makes a lot of sense. Did that then influence you in setting up the press, Relief Press?**

Yeah, I don't know what it was... I'd curated a few shows, after the MA I had a couple of interesting opportunities pop up. I had three different people asking me to curate shows, two of them they just wanted someone to write a successful funding bid, and they thought I'd be good for it. Then there was someone else asked me to curate a show, then I did a residency in LA and on the back of that residency I began to think about some of the things I'd learned in photography and what I wanted to do. Again I didn't feel like I had the confidence, or that I knew myself well enough to establish myself as a practising artist. So I thought publishing for me was a way to curate and continue my research and to write and chuck in a few photographs now and then. It was a way to consolidate everything. Even then, that was in 2012, 2013, I felt that the group show specifically was a dead thing. I didn't think it was a relevant thing any more. Personally, that's just my opinion. I felt that a publishing project would be a lot more interesting, so I started the journal and basically curated three shows with a guy called Damien Griffiths. My wife's a graphic designer so we made these journals, and that's how that started.

**This is a very obvious question but do you enjoy it?**

I did really enjoy it, now I've become more confident as an artist, I've enjoyed my practice more. I spent the last year not doing... we published one book recently by a Polish photographer called Jolanta Dolewska that should be out soon but other than that we haven't really done much. That's because the last year I've not spent much time on it because maybe I've not been enjoying it too much... but now, in this new context that we find ourselves in, I'm feeling that spark again that publishing is going to take another turn and become a really interesting format. So after this show at OUTPUT there's a couple of ideas I've got for my own work to be published. I've got all this - it's a grand word, but this infrastructure in place - and knowledge in place to be able to publish my own work. I've got a little press and anything where you don't have to deal with middle men and that kind of thing is really good. As an artist it makes things a lot more fluid and fun.

**Definitely. Speaking of the exhibition at OUTPUT, can you tell us about the works that are going to be in it? How do you feel about showing them now, as well? Big questions.**

The show at OUTPUT has been quite important for me. It was weird because I went to the INPUT event, about 18 months ago, which feels like forever ago. I was just at that moment trying to be very honest with myself about what my work was about and what I was going to be doing next. I'd done projects about places that I really enjoyed but I felt like there was something missing with what I was doing. I think what I'd been ignoring was my history and my relationship to where I grew up. I began to collate footage and to think about making a piece of work that responds to Liverpool and where I grew up. It had always been a conscious decision not to do that because Liverpool's always had such a strong identity I didn't want to do it wrong. I've always backed off from making any work about where I'm from but when I started the process of doing it, a lot of things clicked into place for me. Not just in relation to the work but also more broadly with what I'm interested in as an artist. My connection with art, as I've said, was with the permanent collections in the city, and Walker gallery is a place I've always gone. In fact one of my earliest memories is in the Walker gallery, my Gran taking us because it was free probably, I don't think she had much of a connection to art. Then we'd go to St. John's meat market afterwards. So one of my early memories is that strange clash of that marble room with all the sculptures in, and St John's meat market. So I always go back the Walker gallery and one of the observations that I made was that there wasn't a lot of landscape paintings about Liverpool, and I wanted to create a work of social landscape work about the modern Liverpool that I grew up in, or that period of time between old Liverpool and new Liverpool. So I just started to collate material, archive found material that I found online. I began to think about that period of my youth, that political context of my youth and all

the things that had happened during that time. From the Kirkby rent strike through to the dockers' scabs out movement, through to Richard and Judy, Granada TV, Quadrant Park, the Toxteth riots. All these really interesting events that weren't just regional, weren't just about Liverpool, they were about bigger issues going on in the country. I felt all these events were connected and I wanted to make a piece of work that connected them all, and it was just really serendipity that at the time when my research got to the point where I had something visual to show, you were doing INPUT and I can't even remember how I heard... I think on Twitter I found out that you were looking for a curator and then from that I'd seen you were doing INPUT, so I went along with this idea and you gave me the opportunity to show it. It all came together from then, really.

**And you've also got photographs in the show as well? Or film, I don't know what you'd call it.**

Yeah, I guess they're like, photo works? The film was made six months ago and then I decided to continue the work and I've brought together found images, screen grabs from lots of the offcuts of footage that I'd been collating, photographs that I'd made and made a series of glass works that expand the theme of the film. The title of the photographic work is "In the North West it rains and it rains and it rains" and the idea with that work is I'm expanding it out from the film, which is very Liverpool-focused, to a 2 or 3 dimensional work which is more broadly speaking about the North West, and about the celebratory and political moments that have happened in the North West over the period of my childhood. And how that period has been very overlooked because the period everyone looks to in the North of England generally is the Industrial Revolution, but no one really- well, there's a lot of photographers who have been documenting this. But no one's really brought together or articulated this period of post-industrial Revolution North to the North we know today. So the work on display at OUTPUT will be specifically about Liverpool and expanding that idea from the film. The title is from a Tony Wilson, and he says in the North West it rains and it rains and it rains but we managed to produce the Industrial Revolution, the Trade Union Movement, the computer and the best music in the world. And down south where the sun never sets, all you've done is produce Chas'n'Dave. You took all our money and all you did is produce Chas'n'Dave. And that is a kind of modern quote which brought to context Orwell's book *The Road To Wigan Pier*, which I read over lockdown. Which initiated the work because there's a really nice bit when he talks about how a Yorkshireman in London knows that he's a king, because he knows that reality exists in the north and down south it's just a fantasy, of people speculating on the work that's happening in the north. For me that Tony Wilson quote brings *The Road To Wigan Pier* into modernity, and I want this piece to be a comment on that idea.

**It definitely is, I think that all comes through, the full package of what you're saying. I've not seen the two layers of film and the glass and the shelves and the lights in person yet but we'll see that during install.**

**So - if you'd like to see Nick's show, we're going to be doing a by-appointment system over the course of the exhibition which is open from October 29th until November 22nd. We'll be putting information up about that across social media and book an appointment if you want to come and see it. Otherwise Nick's going to be doing something quite interesting in terms of the documentation of the show and you'll be able to enjoy that as well. If you've enjoyed this please make sure to share it online so other people can enjoy and listen to Nick's ideas while we're this weird lockdown time and not able to have the typical exhibition opening that we'd normally be having, when everyone can meet him on that Thursday night. Thank you - have you got anything else you'd like to plug?**

Not really - just to say as well I've started to work on my next piece of work, which is going to be a film about the role of the high-rise as a metaphor for class in the UK, and that's what I'll be making over the next year. It uses the Housing Act of 1988 as the starting point and I'll be looking at the transition from public to private housing, the right to buy, the changing of cladding on tower blocks to a cluster of towers between Camden and St John's Wood, the housing action trust which saw the demolition of tower blocks across the UK and Liverpool was quite impacted by that, having 54 tower blocks in total demolished. I have a few little snippets on my instagram which show some of the research I've been doing into that. So that's what I'm working on next, if you're interested in that get in contact.

**And where you can people follow you?**

I'm @nrsmith on instagram, and then all my links to everything else are on that page.

**Amazing. Thank you so much for speaking to me today and thank you to our listeners as well for supporting OUTPUT. Okay, bye!**