

One & Other Project

(Buzzing noise on the recording – probably volume of ZOOM not turned down)

My name is Michelle Owoo and I am carrying out this interview on behalf of the Wellcome Trust for the One & Other project, 1st of September 2009 and the time is 3.26 a.m., could you tell me your name, your age and where you come from please?

My name is Tiffany Oben, I'm 40 and I come from the Rhondda in Wales.

How are you feeling?

Very nervous [giggles] scared.

Is there anything in particular that is bothering you, that you are scared about?

Public performance, I avoid it usually, I do use myself, I'm an artist, I do use myself for my art, but it is usually photography, you know. I dress up, I take photos, try to be other people, re-enact other people, but never actually me myself in front of people doing it. So that's what's scaring me.

But you are dressed as somebody else.

Yes and hopefully no one will recognise me and everything will be OK [chuckles].

With your body, they will not recognise you?

No it's fine, you know, that's fine I try not to tell anybody but I'm not very good at that so, I think I told lots of people so...

When did you come down from [the] Rhondda?

This morning, yes. It was pouring with rain, it was misty there. It took 5 hours on the M4 because the traffic is so bad. Then I got here probably about 5 o'clock.

What have you been doing since then?

Hmm, we went and picked up my daughter from her dad's and then we met up with my step mum and two of my sisters. We went out for a meal and tried not to think about coming and doing this [chuckles].

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When did you hear you had a place?

On the 1st of August. I've got an email and my first reaction was 'no way, I'm not doing it, I can't' and then I started thinking about it. I had an idea beforehand, I kept thinking what I would do if I got through. Oh you know, I'll never get through. It's like the lottery or, you know, a competition, you know, if you haven't got a chance and then I got a place and I had an idea that I've got to go and do it.

Do you think of this as a competition?

Well I thought it was that sort of chance. I didn't see it as a competition, but you do the lottery and you sort of dream of winning but you don't ever expect to win a competition so...

Why did you apply to take part?

Do you know, I can't even remember now, I can't remember hearing about it but I think I really like Antony Gormley's work, you know, liked quite a few things he's done. I really like the way he gets involved with the public. I can't remember the name of the wicker man he did and also [incomp] and I liked that, and I really like the idea because I studied Art History of actually becoming a part of our history so this appealed to me.

Are you studying at the moment?

Yes I just did my dissertation last year which I did about gender, re-enacting gender, I did it on *Grayson Perry* and the Lasuu (?) [incomp] and Mori, Japanese artists and they both dress up as women and take photos of themselves that's what, that's why I'm here today with a moustache.

Where did you study?

I'm at Glamorgan in County [inaud] University of Glamorgan, it's a really little university, it's really nice and everybody knows each other. The tutors know your name [chuckles], they know about you, they know you as people, I think it's really nice.

How long have you lived in Wales?

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Six and a half years in the Rhondda.

Where were you before then?

In Clapham, yes.

At what point did you move to Wales?

House prices at £25,000 pounds [giggles]. Yes it's a really nice place to live, nice for the kids and you can leave your door open and you know things like that. I shouldn't tell people that should I? [chuckles].

Has it made any impact on your or your work creatively since you moved?

Yes I think so. I think my work has really taken off and I discovered what it is I'm interested in and it has become much more conceptually whole, I think. Before I didn't really know what it was about, I've always dressed up and taken photos of myself. I think it is a continuation of dressing up from when I was a child but I didn't quite have it as a concept until the last probably three years.

Did you dress up a lot as a child [interrupted]?

Yes, yes [giggles] until I was about 15, I think [interrupted].

What sort of outfits?

Princesses, it was mostly fabric around you and trying to make dresses and..

To be quite feminine?

Yes always very feminine which is why it has been quite a surprise for me to, hmm, enact men recently and I thought there's no way I'd be able to make a convincing man, I might not look very convincing at the moment but I've taken some photos where you really can't tell. And I was quite surprised by that, I'm not as feminine as I thought I was ,or people aren't, gender isn't as, it's not necessarily an essence, it's something you construct and enact I think.

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And how did you construct your being for that photo?

Oh, it's the same, it's the moustache, the wig and the glasses, the men's clothes and trying to act a bit like a man and I don't know what the difference would be like performing it, just a photo. You [have] just got to get one good shot out of a whole film, just the one. But about the performance I can [only] get away with [...] so much.

Could you describe what you are wearing for me?

Yes I've got my son's school trousers on [chuckles] and his school shoes. He was the same size as me. I've got a white shirt, a black tie, I've got quite a nice jacket that fits me, a small men's jacket, a really awful boy band wig that's really shiny and some glasses and a moustache. I think that's it. I think I'm very eighties I've gone for a very eighties, rather unattractive man [giggles].

Why have you chosen this, to adopt this particular rather than say something quite realistic, which you have done before in your work?

Hmm, I think this is one that has worked for me before and it's, it's, you know, the costumes come together. It's just things I gathered from here and there I rather like to explore other male personas, but it's just the one I've done so far. It's quite new, it's only been probably the last 6 months I discovered this side to my work before it was all women so the man is quite new.

Have you ever tried to pass as a man?

No because I'm too scared, it's the first time tonight that I've actually gone out and done it in public. I'm too scared to do it and I was quite scared and I had some boys laugh at me which almost made me want to run home [giggles]. But you know it was OK, I think, because the plinth is out there and people say 'please tell me you are going up there', you know, I don't know what it would be like probably in Rhondda; it might be a different story, you know.

What might the reaction be, can you imagine that, being in Rhondda?

Well I've mentioned it to people down there and they think that I'd get beaten up [laughs] so I'm not going to go and try really. But it's, again, it's the performance, I just, am not a performer really, my younger sister does that [giggles]. I do the art.

How are you going to spend your time on the plinth?

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I'm going to go up there, I'm going to look around as a man, I'm going to take some photos which I see as a sort of mastering and taking possession of the scene and then going to start undressing. I've got my fake penis that I might swing around a bit you know and slowly undress and it's going to get to a point where I [have] just got my shirt and my penis, I'm going to take my male wig off and put a blonde feminine wig and I'm going to symbolically castrate myself [chuckles]. I think there is going to be a point where I'm naked I don't know how long that's going to last, how long I'm going to cope with it but there's going to be a change over time and then I'm going to start putting a Victorian lady's costume. So I've got a [incomp], I've got a corset, bloomers, stockings and a big Victorian dress [sirens in the background] and some other bits so I'm going to become the Victorian lady and then this is when I'm not wearing a wig and it's more me and I can sort of handle it a bit more you know.

What does a Victorian lady symbolise for you?

I think it's where all the gender issues come from, you know, the way we look on gender. I think they might have come from that period; it's when things were categorised, there was a very definite, you know, what is acceptable what was unacceptable. So I've been reading a lot of Zola (?) recently and Griselda Pollock, you know feminist art history, it seems to me, and I think the woman who I thought I was before I discovered all this about gender, is a construction. I think it might have come from a lot of Victorian literature and art and that's where my construction was [sirens in the background] and it is all being demolished now because I realise it is a construction. So I think that's where the Victorian lady comes from and also I didn't want to do a modern lady because it would have meant cavorting around in bra and knickers and I thought that's too sexy really, my corset isn't a fetish corset it's a functional Victorian corset. It's more covering up after my nakedness [chuckles].

What about the symbolic act of castrating yourself, why on the plinth?

Hmm [pause].

Where does that spring from?

Well, it's this, hmm, I've recently understood what penis envy is all about, you know, you've learnt about it in art history and there were women who would go to the coffee bar 'I'm not envious of penis, I never wanted one'. But what it is actually about is men as symbol, you know they've got the *willy*, the penis, but what, the fact of being a man means they have power; they have a whole subject activity, you know, they are a whole people. Whereas women are objectified and that is what the envy is, it's sort of not having that power, not having that sense of self hood so that's what it's about and I'm sort of saying 'damn that, sod that', I'm becoming a subject. Well I've missed

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out a bit actually, when I'm, when the *willy* is on the floor I'm going to be probably naked and take photos so that is becoming the nude as an artist, you know, subverting the tradition of the nude mortal and, yes, she is actively taking photos, she is not an object she is a subject so, yes.

Are you going to be talking to anybody?

No, I'm not doing any talking, and I don't know what people actually get, I'm never very good at talking, I'm much better at writing but I don't [know] whether people are going to get half of what I'm doing, it's just going to be something that's happening. Obviously they are going to understand that they are pulling the penis off but you know I don't think that many people, unless they've read the literature that I've read, I don't think they would connect you know to my concept really.

What do you like about Grayson Perry's work?

Hmm, originally, hmm, he won the Turner Prize the year I started, because I also work with ceramics, so he won the Turner Prize the year I started ceramics and, hmm, I felt a lot of ceramics was quite boring and suddenly there was somebody making this gorgeous past [?] painting beautiful pictures on them, or not so beautiful pictures the closer you looked. And that's that and I also like the fact he played with gender, that interested me, I did get to a point when I was writing my dissertation, I was a bit annoyed because he was dressing up as a woman but actually he is a bloody man and, you know, and he is the whole powerful male artist, he doesn't understand and yes, I think, it's the whole thing. I love the way he plays with his gender. I love his dressing up. I love his photos as much and that's what I wrote about in my dissertation, photos of him dressed up as different women and yes.

What do you like about Antony Gormley's work do you think?

It's that, hmm, it's the ceramics again, I really liked *Field*, I like the way he got involved, he got people to come along and make little figures and it's, it's the involvement, it's making people become of the hour, that's what it's really good I think and I also think you know it's figures on the beach I kind of, I'm not very good with his titles [interrupted]

[inaud speech from the interviewer]

Yes I thought they were lovely, they are very contemplative, staring out to sea on the beach, it's really nice and you know the spacing of it and then the ones on the buildings as well, it's the same isn't it, it's the unexpectedness of them so I think there's something very beautiful about his work.

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What do you think about [inaud] this being a part of your work and the overall picture of being Antony Gormley's work?

Yes, that's, that's the thing, isn't it because here I am saying that I'm going to master, take control, master it, it's my concept, my work you know and this feminist thing that I'm getting mixed up in. But actually there's a man controlling it over all so it does that, it wipes away everything and I have even heard that he would like, at some point he said he'd like to see my nudes up there so I'm giving him exactly what he wants so...

How do you feel about that?

Well I feel a bit annoyed but obviously not that annoyed really, I just like the layers. It's just a nice big muddle and I like that, one side looks one way and then you come to the other and there's something else going on so.

Have you ever been naked in public before?

No, never, you know and I don't go on the beach in a bikini, I don't wear revealing clothes [giggles]. But actually I'm telling a lie because I openly breast-fed my children, I was very political about that, you know, and I had twins and openly breast-fed them and I got told off in court for doing it and I told off in pubs for doing that so, yes, I suppose it's a different way, different kind of nakedness but it was reacted in, yes, not in the same way but there is some sort of connection isn't there?

Who was it that complained?

It was women both times I got told off by women so, but I mean it was with twins so you are there with everything out so, yes [giggles].

How would you describe yourself as a person?

Well I wasn't very good on that, you know, the thing, the three words, I've got no idea of what, I think I was confused. I was always very sure of how I was and then [in the] last few years doing this gender work, I just haven't got a clue anymore. I don't know what's real you know, what is part of the construction and what's performance, I don't know [giggles].

How are really immersed in your work [interrupted]?

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Yes I am and that's one of my partner's complaints about me, I get so immersed that I sort of forget everything else, so.

What was it like, how long have you been with your partner?

17 years.

So how different was it before you went to study and, because of the impact, or?

Yes, I've definitely become more involved in it. It's been quite a long time because it's been part time and then I had a baby in the middle and I didn't stop thinking about it so, it's been since 2003. So I can't even remember [what] I was doing before; I was working, I was in London working as a business planner, that was what I was doing.

So what was it that prompted the shift [interrupted]?

Well it's more [that] the business planning was a job I fell into, you know, but I was sort of doing the art before then. I was at Camberwell doing, hmm, a foundation and then we decided we should try to make money so I got involved in starting up a business and wrote business plans and, I think, I was very good at that and so they offered me a job helping with that, and that made me think art is silly, I've got to start making some money really [chuckles]. But now I've gone back and I'm still doing that part time but yes it's like something I do quickly to get it out of the way and then I go back to whatever it is that I'm planning to do next.

So what was your partner's reactions when you told him you wanted to take part in this [interrupted]?

He was really supportive you know and I was the one, 'Oh I don't want to do it, Oh you've got to do it you know it's a really good opportunity to get your work known' and I think that some opportunities will sort of launch me into [chuckles], I don't know, the art world, but I think it's just something that you do and that's it and then you move on, don't you?

Have you shown your work?

Only [interrupted]

Especially in Wales?

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Yes, only, I've been in a gallery in Swansea with some photos and then I've been in some shows as well at the university but not very far afield.

Are you always at the centre of your work?

Yes, it's always me, it has always been [chuckles]. I haven't quite worked out why. I've got lots of excuses but, hmm, you know, I haven't worked out why and nobody else fascinates me as much as myself. You know, I'm not interested in using a model. People say, 'why don't you use a model?' Or people advise me to get into performance and use some models and film them and I am just not interested in that, it's got to me.

Are you looking forward to it now?

No, I've forgotten about it actually [giggles]. I'm sure it'll be fine, I'm looking forward to [it] being over and I had a dream that it was all over and I was so relieved in my dream and I was like 'Oh no, I {have} still got to do it, it was only a dream' so we'll see because I am not very good with excitement, I get really nervous and, yes.

How does it..?

I mean internally, I get really jittery and I can't handle it at all so, I'm just going to try and relax [giggles].

Is there anything else you'd like to say?

No I think that's it.

Thank you very much.

That's OK.

END OF RECORDING