

One & Other Project

Hello my name is Kate Rowles and I'm interviewing you for the Wellcome Trust as you are taking part in the Antony Gormley's art work One and Other. The date today is the 18th of July 2009 and if I can please ask you to state your full name, date of birth and where you come from?

My full name is Neil Thomas Ellis, my year of birth is 18th of the 4th '67 and I live in Dulwich in South East London.

Is that where you are from?

Well I lived in South London for 22 years, 24 years but I grew up in Devon until I was 18.

Where in Devon?

A village called Riverton which is just on South Dartmoor, the edge or Dartmoor.

And how are you today?

Yeah good, excited a bit nervous.

Yeah, you are about to go up on the fourth plinth.

Yeah, yeah.

At 1 o'clock in the afternoon, what was it about this project that made you want to take part?

Well I've always followed the Fourth Plinth and a lot of the ideas about rotating pieces of art that changes. It's a great idea when it started and I've been following it and I know of Antony Gormley from the area. Basically he has studios in Peckham I believe, nearby his lamp post and stuff and his other pieces and we all applied at my offices in Clapham and we all applied in the office for some fun basically and I got selected even though my friend Sabina applied for me but then I got picked and it was quite funny when the email came through, it's like one of those competition emails. She read about it four times thinking, I don't quite get this and eventually it sunk in that I was doing it which is great, very exciting but then it took me weeks to decide what to do [out] of panic.

And.

But I got there in the end.

Did you?

Yeah.

And what have you decided to do?

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In the end after going for various ideas, I want to do something, it's such an opportunity and an audience, I wanted to do something as well as being creative but also sort of political, get a message across. I'm a very keen cyclist in London and I sort of recently [have] been shocked at the amount of deaths of cyclists so this is a tribute to the cyclists that have died since January last year; 22 people and to, just to raise people's awareness of it and start debate and discussion. I started a *Facebook* group. I've got 140 members on it with the name of the plinth encouraging people to join and the whole point of today is to, is to symbolise how many people, to make aware to people the extent of this and create a discussion and a debate and what can be done.

And how are you going to do that?

I've [interrupted].

What's your outfit for example today?

Well I'm dressed as a skeleton and I would be wearing a cycling helmet. I've got my bike which is sprayed white like a ghost bike taking the idea from the ghost bike [inaud] who leaves bikes with things from people that died with their names on and I'm erecting 22 banners, 8 foot banners. They will be all around the perimeter of the plinth and I'll be cycling in the middle of it and there'll be messages on the basis of it. It's very, it looks good, it's creative. I want to give that impression of being, gaining people's attention, being interested, looking quite beautiful in a way but then up close a bit more shocking when people actually realise what's it's about.

And what do you think of cycling in London, how do you find cycling in London?

Oh I love it, I love it. It's dangerous but I cycle everywhere, I cycle to work, I cycle up to meetings up in town and yeah, but it's dangerous and there's not enough being done to protect cyclists and you know it's a two way thing cyclists need to be more safe for it as well but there's too many, out of the 22 people that have died 15 have been by lorries which is a sort of staggering amount so that needs to be addressed that's why I want to create this debate and discussion to see what ideas people have.

And how have you, have you done a lot of research into this?

Yeah.

How did you find out about the figures and things?

Well [pause] the research [was done] on the internet basically and seeing signs everywhere where people die, reading the local press. The woman that died at Elephant and Castle; there's a woman died 3 weeks ago at Oval and I cycle past the sign every day of the fatal incident and then did research on to the internet and tried to speak to TFL [Transport for London] which has been painful.

Really?

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Yes.

In what way?

Just very bureaucratic, very lip service trying to fob you off. They are doing good things and that's, that needs to be recognised but they are doing lots of little things they are not doing it enough, big macro level things.

What do you think needs to be done?

I think well (a), I want to get people's opinion. It's not all about what I think, but I have got ideas. There's a debate needs to happen about why so many HGVs are in London in the first place; do they all need to be here? Should they be licensed or should they go out of hours, maybe cycle lanes need to be more [incomp] from roads if they are on the road they should either be on the pavement, a physical separation, if they are on the road maybe a raised curb in between the road and the cycle lane, cyclists need to be more careful and abide [by] the law more and there's a host of things. But I want to create this debate and discussion and then from that I'm gonna have a sort of a list of suggestions that I can go to TLF. But it's got to look great as well, that's the whole point. I didn't want to go out there and preach, I wanted it to be a visual statement and with a message.

Brilliant, and how did you find this costume?

Oh my business is window display and I've been doing it, I've run my own business for 10 years. We do a lot of the high street things, Christmas decorations and everything so I'm quite adapted at finding stuff and this is through one of the internet companies that do costumes so ,yeah.

Great yeah what kind of, what sort of window displays have you done that...

I've done a Ted Baker, probably what I'm most famous for, I've done all the Ted Baker's windows in the last 10 years and they are often all animated and moving and they go all around the world so I do most, I have worked for most of the high street; Marks and Spencer, House of Fraser, New Look, Oasis, Sainsbury's, all the big names.

And what's your business called?

It's called Planarama.

Planarama, and have you got a website?

I have yeah, <http://www.planarama.com> all 'a's.

Fantastic.

Great.

And about you, if I can ask.

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Yeah.

If you could say a bit about you, what your interests are.

Yeah.

I'm well I'm 42, I'm gay, I'm in a civil partnership with Stevie and I've been with him for 19 years, 20 years next year, I live in Dulwich which I love, I love London and I keep fit, cycle, go out clubbing, work hard and enjoy life basically.

Brilliant, when did you get your civil partnership?

The first day it was legal, 21st of December 2006, yeah, 6 or 7, the first day it was legal.

Can I ask you to comment on that on the civil [interrupted]?

Oh yeah. It was great. It was a very, very big day it was a fantastic finale because I remember I sort of came out in the late 80s when it was much more political, the Pride march it was more of a political march and Tony Blair's government has been highly criticised, they also did a lot of good for gay people fantastic progress in the 10 years they were in power, tremendous change happened for the better and it's just fantastic that we reached this stage and it's great and we feel really sort of exonerated if you like.

Yeah brilliant.

And recognised as citizens, you know, from being ignored and maybe felt like you were looked down upon etcetera all of a sudden you become a normal citizen for a better world which doesn't mean much to most people but to us is fantastic.

When you said 'coming out in the 80s, it was very political'.

Yeah.

Could you talk about that a little bit?

Yeah.

If it's not too...

Well, I mean it was a time, you know AIDS [was] at its height and [pause] I'm HIV positive, I found out about 10 years ago and that's fine now treatment is good and stuff so to go back to your question the political time was very much about standing up for our rights and being recognised. When I was coming out people were still being arrested for having sex parties in their own homes and stuff and it was just a completely different world than it is now and it's much for the better now.

And what does it mean for you personally to stand on the Fourth Plinth?

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I think it's a fantastic opportunity. I love London, I've always, my earliest memory in Devon was wanting to move to London and that all I worked towards by the time I was 18 I got on a train and left [both chuckle]. So to be on the centre of London on the Fourth Plinth, it is just fantastic, it is like an honour and as I said I wanted to use that for a point as well have a purpose to it and a message.

Brilliant, and what impact do you think it will have this project?

Well, what impact? I don't know, we'll have to wait and see. I mean I already got a 140 [people interested] in a week of *Facebook*, a group of 140 members, I've got people debating about it already. I've got, there'll be a message on the plinth about the *Facebook* group and I'll see how many more people join from that. I've got people handing leaflets out on the square itself so we'll see. It'll be an interesting exercise to see what political effect it has.

Yeah brilliant.

It will do though. [?]

Yeah.

Even if it's just me in the end.

And there's a rally happening today.

Yeah I know it's a bit of a shame.

[The interviewer giggles].

The fun that might be taken of it but I can't remember who was it? The funny... [?]

It's a religious rally, I've not been told exactly what's it's about but, yeah we'll see.

Perhaps I should have done a more overtly gay demonstration if I knew that. [The interviewer giggles]. That would have been more interesting, maybe but it will be very interesting and exciting.

Great, OK, can I ask a personal question?

Yeah.

That we ask everybody?

Yeah.

Which is what's important to you in your life?

My partner Stevie, my home, my friends, my business, the people I work with in my business, my cat and my garden.

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OK, you like gardening?

I do yeah. I was brought up in a garden centre, but I resisted it for years, a sort of normal rebellion against your parents but yeah I love it, I love my garden.

Do you grow flowers and vegetables?

Flowers, tried vegetables once and I can't, you keep getting deluged with the same vegetable for 2, 3 weeks, if you are really clever you can get your timing right but, no we turned the vegetable plot into a cut flower garden which is much nicer.

Have you got a favourite flower?

[Pause] Buddleias. I think so they're a poor relation in the garden but I like them. They grow on derelict ground and bomb sites. London was famous for buddleias after the war on bomb sites. I think they are a beautiful plant and encourage butterflies which are lovely.

Thank you very much.

Great thank you.

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