

## One & Other Project

*My name is Michelle Owoo and I'm carrying out this interview on behalf of the Wellcome Trust. The date is 25th of August 2009 and time is 9.25 am. Can I ask your name, your age and where you come from, please?*

My name is David Bennie but I prefer to be known as Bennie rather than David, I'm 57 and I live in North London.

*And how are you feeling?*

As we were saying a couple of minutes ago, a bit amused, a bit bemused, curious is probably the best way to describe it in a single word.

*Why curious would you say?*

By definition I've never done anything like this before. It's even more so in my case because I'm a last minute replacement. I think most people had a month's notice or thereabouts and they had time to work out what to do, they may have had a fairly firm concept before they even applied or whatever. I was phoned on Friday afternoon and it's now Tuesday morning and asked if I could come. Fine, you know, I've got a fairly flexible life. I can fit that in fairly easily but I've had no time to prepare so my thoughts when I first applied months ago were that, for me, Trafalgar square is all about political protest, I've probably been here thousands of times in the course of the last forty years or so for one reason or another and I thought I ought to do something on that line and with only a few days to go I had various ideas in my head but what I actually did in the end was send an email to the climate camp organisation and they started organising themselves to connect with me on this, so to a certain extent I don't know what's going to happen when I'm going up there, I've got a bag of goodies which I'll do my best to spread up on the plinth.

*Do you know what those are?*

Banners, flags, a tent, things like these so I'm not quite sure how it is going to work out practically until I go up there.

*Why did you choose climate camp, any particular reasons?*

Well I think firstly because they're going to be having a major action starting in a couple of days so the timing was absolutely perfect. Secondly I thought these are the sort of people who would be capable of gearing up, I think ... I've gone through a variety of political phases over my life, I'm not really a person who joins up to organisations I'm a bit too individualistic for that. I'm aware of climate camp, I like their style, I like the fact they are extremely informed and there's no hierarchy and that sort of thing. So they seem like a sort of bunch I could operate with even though I had no formal contact with them, I'm not a member or an activist as such, I'm the sort of person who gets involved in this sort anyway and I had been broadly thinking that I might well attend climate camp not as a full week process but once, what will happen as far as I understand it if that tomorrow or the next day they will be clustering in 10 different places around London and, in order to confuse the police, they will know, somebody among their organisation will know where they are going to occupy and people will suddenly sweep on that and

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take over that place their aim will be to occupy a certain location or space or whatever for four, five or six days. When that happens it will get plenty of press publicity and I'll find out where it is and then I can go along to that. That was my thinking. I'll go along to a day or two and soak up the atmosphere, and get a bit more involved than I intended which suits me fine.

*You mentioned that you've been in the square on numerous occasions before.*

Yes.

*For all kinds of events.*

Yes.

*Can you tell some of those, what were you doing here?*

Well, I mean I say most were political events of some sort. I was 16 in 1968 which was a year of revolution and uprisings throughout the world and I think it formed my world view. A couple of years later I was a student at London school of Economics during the most radical phase, I think it's terribly mainstream these days and political protest was almost a daily or weekly event there, you know, if something happened we would be out on the street, it was almost instinctive and, in fact, the first incident I can recall of that sort around here was around the time of the Bloody Sunday incidents in Northern Ireland and I remember we were in college, this occurred on a Sunday morning, we were all in a state of shock. We got into college the next day and we simply marched on Parliament, we dug out a few banners, a few people gathered and we simply marched on Parliament, you could do that in those days, I mean there were far less restrictions, year by year over a period of twenty-four years virtually after Thatcher and the present Labour government getting into power. There have been restrictions on the rights of political protest but it was much more flexible in those days, certainly a few weeks after that there was a huge demonstration relating to Bloody Sunday and I can remember there were sort of thirteen coffins carried by the demonstrators and they were trying to force their way into Downing Street in the days before they had the metal railings and so on. So that was vaguely ... my memories of demonstrations in the square and after that so many things passed through, there were CND marches, the poll tax riot. I was actually here for the poll tax riot but didn't actually know that was going on, the demonstration was so big you only knew what was going on around you, most of it was actually fairly quiet but there were incidents where the press focused on the release of the dramatic bits, if you were one street away you would not have had a clue about what's going on and that's often the nature of what happens in a large crowd. I also remember a big May Day anarchist thing, I turned up because I didn't have nothing better to do that day, they were giving Winston Churchill a Mohican in Parliament square and things like that. When I was a student I seemed to be out on demonstrations every few weeks, now I'm in my fifties it seems to happen once or twice a year against the Iraq war or whatever. It's going to be ... something will turn up that seemed important enough to turn up but often enough they seem to end up in Trafalgar Square, which seems to me to be what Trafalgar square is mainly about.

*How do you think today's experience will compare with previous?*

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It won't compare at all, it will be something completely different hmm but, unusually for me, it will be some sort of focal point of what's going on now. I'll be waiving a banner on top of a huge plinth which will be a sort of different sort of experience.

*Have you regarded yourself in the past as somebody who was an observer during some of those days of demonstrations rather than somebody who was in the midst of things?*

I've been in more focused roles usually than smaller more localised activities and, for a lack of better words, led into situations following other situations. But what I've never been is part of an organised political sect which is with this, the hierarch and structure which never suited me yes, my Trotsky friends used to call me an anarchist, my other friends called me a Trotsky but I was never one or the other.

*How would you describe yourself?*

Politically or...

*No, as a person.*

Oh it's funny because I was asked for a three word description before I was going on here and I said a seventies style Lefty but that's only one part of any person, someone cannot describe themselves simply. I mean I am to a certain extent in despair about the mess that human beings are creating with this planet and with society in general. I say, as a student in the seventies and the years immediately following, we sought to change the world and we thought it seemed so obvious to us that things had to change the direction they would take and they've not taken the directions that I wanted them to take. Some things, I think the green movement is a fairly natural successor of the politics we had at the time, feminism at its peak was another natural strand and both of those had a degree of success. I was never a hard-line socialist but I'm very much a believer in equality which seems almost to have been thrown out of the window in the society in which I live so my politics haven't changed dramatically over the years but my belief in, you know, my optimism has I'm afraid. I now work on the assumption that I will not see a better world in my life time and so part of the result of that I would have to find another outlet that would give me some form of satisfaction or another and that led to an increase in the arts in general which is part of ... when I first applied for this I'd been in the National Gallery. I'd seen the original displays of the proposal for the current fourth plinth project and there seemed to be more interesting ones. I can't remember which ones I voted for off hand, it might have been this one or another but I'm not honestly a huge fan of contemporary art, most of it I find pretentious and not particularly artistic. My particular area of interest in recent years is classical Indian art. I collect small Indian old brown sculptures. I've been to India many times, so what am I? I'm a very politically conscious arty type I mean, how one does define those things?

*When did you start becoming interested in the arts?*

I can put that down nicely. In 1975 I spent four months hitch hiking around Europe just with a rucksack on my back and a ground sheet and sleeping bag, sleeping like a tramp more or less and extremely ignorant. I met ... I remember I got to Barcelona and I couldn't tell the difference between the Gothic cathedrals and *Gaudi La Sagrada Familia*, and

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I couldn't speak a word of other foreign languages and that following winter I took out of the library a huge book on European architectural history and next year I did a shorter hitching trip. I was actually trying to pin down some interesting old buildings and so forth and, you know, it was almost precisely at the point that I started to take a serious interest in art history. It's a continuous process, sadly I've never much produced in the way of myself, I haven't actually developed the technical skills that I find a bit inhibited.

*Are you working at the moment?*

No, I was made redundant from a job on a community regeneration scheme a year or two ago. I was made redundant, it's in my nature. I seem to be temperamentally incapable of doing as I'm told so they found a way to keep me on full pay for a year at home when they made me redundant but I've always lived very simply whenever I've been working. I've saved plenty of money, I reckon I can survive, I live frugally until I get my pension and I'm not desperately seeking work. I think when people ask me I'm not sure whether I'm in early retirement or unemployed because I've never stated to myself I would never work again but I may ... I think it is entirely possible it won't happen and most people, it seems to me, work in order to obtain things they don't need and I don't need that much so I can get by.

*Where about did you grow up?*

Very close to where I live now. I grew up in Finsbury Park and at that time it was an extremely poor working class area and mine was an extremely poor working class family, it doesn't sound like it because at some point along the course of things I've acquired a middle class accent with going to university and so on and so forth. But my brothers and sisters still have cockney accents, you know, we were almost observably poor and it would have been a sort of social case study at the time we were there for ten years, we moved to Forrest Gate for ten years and ended up in Romford for a few years and then I ended up back in Finsbury Park because Finsbury Park had changed and become a student area, do you see what I mean? And I squatted in the area so it seemed that the area seem to become ... it changed with me and became a bit too expensive for me and I've ended up a mile or so away in Tottenham so the poor person of Finsbury Park.

*Do your brothers and sisters ever talk to you about your accent being so different, that your journeys in some ways...?*

I have very little contact with them, in fact, I phoned my sister yesterday evening to let her know I'll be doing this and she could watch me on the website. I haven't seen any of my siblings in years you know. I left home when I was twenty. I was the oldest and took a different direction, with one exception. We don't get on too bad but we just don't have enough in common, one brother became a policeman and a Thatcherite and we haven't had any contact in the last thirty years but that's another matter entirely. But the others, you know, there was actually a family wedding of a niece a month ago but I was not able to make it as I said to my sister I didn't actually know my niece if I sat next to her on the bus I wouldn't recognise her. I seem, through my life, to have had more interest in the friends I've ended up choosing or acquiring in the course of life than in the people I happen to be brought up by blood relations when I was

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younger.

*Was your dad politically active? Was he a socialist?*

No not at all, he was a small and a [?] conservative. He was blind, he was a pub piano player, he knew the Cranes because he was a wheeler dealer always doing things that were sometimes legal and sometimes illegal. He probably would have been a very capable individual if he had not been blind at the age of eight and he was just a ... I mean he died when I was relatively young, I was about nineteen, my first year at college and we were certainly in total conflict at that time because I had taken a very different direction. Who knows how things might have been if they had gone [?] and that but I think I've realised over the years that he probably had more influence on me that I probably realised. I mean he was very Jewish, he was in his own way very political, he was politically aware, you know, he listened to the radio and he was always into things very different to me. And he had that Jewish thing, you know, of arguing and getting involved in things which certainly rubbed off on me and although we were not brought up religiously I remember years ago being at a friend's restaurant birthday meal and there were two or three of us who were a quarter Jewish and I sat there and I don't know if I regard myself as Jewish or not and a friend of mine said, Bennie if anyone is Jewish you are Jewish.

*Why?*

I think because of my mannerisms, you know, talkative individual and argumentative and talkative individual that sort of thing.

*Do you find it difficult to get on with someone if you do not agree with their politics? Do you have any friends where that is the case?*

No, I may have an interesting conversation with a stranger and I may find that curious but I would not choose to have a friend who had a completely different world view. I wouldn't establish a friendship... there are off course completely ... you know, spectrums. I wouldn't expect someone to agree to something that nobody would providing ... you know, I would not have a friend who is a Tory, as simple as that, but I'm not going to be, not being a sect member. I can't be more precise than that, you know, someone who didn't have a broad perspective similar to mine would not be a person I would make any great effort to make a friendship with. Of course you work with people who have a different sort of perspective and you work well with them and that sort of thing but I know that's not the way that I am.

*What was it specifically about this project that appealed to you, do you think?*

I doubt that I gave an enormous mass amount of thought to it. I mean, as I say, I saw the display in the National gallery, then I saw the references that it was actually gearing up there was a website address, I'd check it out. I thought why not? It's a one in twenty chance of those who apply so it's a nice injection into my life and it's particularly random in this case I was phoned and given two or three days notice. I think it's as good a way of using the plinth as any, my own preference of the plinth has been the more clearly defined sculpture work that appear on that, the Alison Lapper, was that her name? And I

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forgot his name, Bill Woodrow, the tree that was going up, that I particularly liked. My preference is for figurative so both fit very readily into that, modern rather than contemporary; I like to think things that to a certain extent deal with the human condition. I suppose it does it in its own way but not in such a visual way.

*Are you looking forward to it?*

As I say, more or less curious. I'm going to be up there for an hour. It will pass relatively quickly; two or three friends will probably turn up, one with his five year old daughter which will be bemused by the site of me on the plinth. I've got a whole bunch of supporters who I don't know which will be down below, as I say, I'm not sure how it is going to develop. I enjoy doing things that are out of the ordinary, injecting a randomness into my life occasionally, that's part of what makes life worthwhile, there are very broad philosophical questions about what makes life worthwhile and I'm not convinced, as I say, I've got grave doubts about the mess we've created in all sorts of different ways but one has to get something out of it while one is around.

*Have you got any more trips planned?*

Not at the moment. I could in theory afford them but it would be using up my savings. Also, I mean sometimes, it is making a virtue out of necessity but I know that, I mean I made too many long haul flights in my life to really justify them to myself but I mean I probably will go away once or twice. Also I have mild diabetes, it's not anything that's inhibited me I've been back packing around Asia for the last 10 or 15 years since I was diagnosed but at some point in the future I may not be able to make trips which is why every now and then I feel like I've got to make another long trip to make sure that I'm still physically capable of that sort of thing.

*To India?*

India, South Asia those sorts of places, around the world like that.

*What is it about South Asia that really appeals?*

I don't know, people say that sort of thing but I went to India for the first time in 1985, two months. The organisation I worked for was sufficiently flexible enough that I was able to put a two month trip together. I assumed it would be a one off; somehow it seemed that everyone had to go to India at some point in their lives and tried to make sense of the place so I went off there in my usual way. I was, because I ... when I've been to India I've been rushing to every conceivable interesting monument and site and all the rest of it and I packed in too much in those eight weeks and it was, you know, it was very interesting. I gained no great fortune beyond that but then a year later I had the chance, I had another six weeks spare so I went back there and I did the same things two years after that and found that I was sort of getting more interest by the [?] and then by the late eighties I wasn't sure what I wanted to do with my life. I was thinking of quitting work, I was thinking of doing something else and a sort of half way house I was able to go to part time hours at work and I went back to university and did a degree in non European art history, it had a slightly different title, in SOAS, in London, with a specialisation in India and, as I say, it was never ... sometimes one's area of interest just happens and

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that's what happened in this case. After that I went back to India for the fourth time with a great deal more knowledge and that tempted me to go back in the future. I went to South East Asia because it fitted in with my other studies and so it's really through that I became interested in the arts, followed the arts and it was also an area where I could afford to buy little pieces which were not completely impossible and now I've got a very interesting collection. I spent a lot of the last six months in the British Museum to study the sort of the little bronzes that never get seen in public, I've almost become the leading expert of the bronzes that nobody wants.

*Have they got an interesting collection of bronzes?*

It's curious because they have got pieces, individual works, which are worth than my entire collection on their own but they've also got five hundred things of the sort I collect, relatively small petty items and they are not really any better than my collection. But they are interesting because some were collected one or two hundred years ago, one can therefore pinpoint them more precisely as to what they are from when they were collected and they certainly have given me a new angle on the things I've got and I've been photographing them and taking notes, as I say, literally because I don't have any massive expertise that nobody else is particularly interested in. As a result I'm becoming more knowledgeable about those items than the museum curators are because they don't take anything seriously unless it's more than 5000 years old.

*Is there anything else you'd like to say?*

Not really, I'm going to see what happens now.

*Thank you very much.*