

One & Other Project

My name is Paula Testa and I'm conducting this interview on behalf of the Wellcome Trust for the One & Other project by Antony Gormley in Trafalgar Square. It's the 18th of July and it is 7.30 p.m. Could you please tell me your full name, date of birth and where you are from?

My name is Ceri Aston, my date of birth is the 15th of the second '72 and I'm from Manchester.

And how are you feeling about going on the Fourth Plinth?

Oh god it's ... I don't know. I'm quite calm now. I'm here I was a bit of a mess sort of earlier this afternoon I think. I work in telly so there's always a lot of deadlines and stress and adrenaline pumping and I think what I've realised about myself is that as soon as you put something in front of me which has to be dealt with I'm okay about it but it's the bit up that kind of gets me every time now I'm here I'm fine but a few hours ago I was having the nerves.

How did you first hear about the project?

On *Facebook*, do you want to self contain my answers? I heard about ... you are not bothered? Okay, I heard about this project on *Facebook* it just popped up one day on the *Facebook* page I clicked on it sort of registering my interest but I guess I thought what was going to happen in order to get on the plinth you might have to do some crazy style audition like you would have to do if you are going in the Big Brother house and I think that's what I assumed would happen and I thought if it gets to that stage I'm just not going to bother going ahead with it because I'm not really that kind of person. And so yes I'll say that I'm interested, see what comes of it and leave it at that but if it gets to that additional stage forget it. And of course I never did ... you know I suddenly ... the next thing I know it's this email saying you've been accepted now tell us something about yourself and I thought that really appealed to me because there wasn't any of that silly kind of you have got to be a certain kind of person, you have got to be an exhibitionist, you have got to be an extrovert, you have got to tick a box. There wasn't any of that. It was like who are you, are you interested? Yes I am. Okay we want you, now who are you? And so because it was that way sort of compiled I thought well I'm definitely on for this and I want to take part in it.

So what inspired you to apply initially?

Obviously actually lots of people have sat here and said I'm a very big fan of Antony Gormley but the bottom line is that I am. I'm not an art sort of expert. I'm not somebody who is very knowledgeable about art, culture or anything like that but I know what I like and you know I've seen the *Angel of the North* I've been to *Crosby* and I've seen the figures mysteriously kind of appearing and disappearing as the tides comes in and out I thought it was fantastic. I was at the Royal Academy this morning at the summer show and there was an Antony Gormley which blew anything else out of the water and I think to be part of this project and to be part of kind of history if you like. It's something very grand and somebody very important will eventually get up on that plinth you know they cannot go on using it as a temporary

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kind of, you know, artist in residence thing forever and I think whilst they are doing that it's just fantastic to be one of those people who have contributed to it.

So what does it mean to you to be a part of it?

It means a lot to be a part of it despite all the nerves and despite all the, you know, oh God do I really want to do this and is somebody going to throw a kebab at me? Will people laugh at me? Will I get wet because it would pour down with rain, you know, all the kind of misgivings that you have. Despite all that, as I just said, previously it's about being part of something incredibly special and the very fact you know I was chosen simply because I clicked on a box and I just happened to be an ordinary person from Manchester and I didn't have to do anything in particular, mad or zany, or kind of out there to kind of be on the plinth. I could just be who I am and I was chosen for that, just means everything and I want to be a part of that and I'm very happy to be here.

What happened when you found out you had your place?

Well I was working at the time. I was making a documentary for Channel 4 and I was in the middle of a really stressful edit and, you know, the deadline was approaching and I was doing some silly hours and I get this email saying congratulations you have been accepted. And, as I said earlier, you know, all I had originally done was to click on a box and say that I wanted to do it, so it was one like oh my God. I sort of told the person that was sitting next to me I've just been selected to do this plinth thing and it's like God, you know, but then I had to very quickly put it out of my mind because it was so chaotic at work and to be honest it's only really in the last week that I suddenly had to start really thinking what I want to do on there because my mind was just so crowded with other stuff up until a week ago. But, you know, I guess I'll always be able to remember where I was when I got the acceptance email through anyway.

So what will you be doing on the plinth anyway?

It's a case of doing what I won't be doing on the plinth. It's been really interesting. I think I'm number 300 up there. I've been like all the other *plinthers*, I guess I've been sort of obsessed with the website and looking at what everybody is doing and you know you see your Elvis impersonators and you see guys on treadmills and you see your women doing things through the medium of dance and you think, oh God, the pressure is on, isn't it? Then I thought, no it's not. I read an interview, there was a quote from Antony Gormley which I read this morning, no yesterday, and he basically said, you know, it's very tempting to go up there and do something extraordinary but it's very, very tempting to go up there and do nothing and I'm kind of subscribing to that really. What I decided to do in the last week is take the ashes of my husband up, he died three years ago and we just had his third anniversary of his death and he died in an avalanche on Mount Blanc and, you know, I kind of thought about this and well, you know, what is a plinth actually for? You know, and as I said earlier, you know at some point that plinth will have some amazing statue to some hero or some historical figure you know that did something amazing, you know. The plinths are there to commemorate the dead and it just makes complete sense to me to take a bit

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of Damien up with me and, you know, having him up there with me in his little pot next to me and just before I kind of come back down from the plinth I just chuck him over my shoulders and send him to the wind I think it's ... he's been scattered in many places on the top of Snowdonia, he's been scattered all over but I think I can now say part of him has been scattered from the top of the fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square and I think that's pretty unique.

And you doing nothing? Will you be talking to people or do you think you'll just be standing there?

I won't be talking to myself. I mean if anybody wants to ask me anything from Trafalgar Square, you know, if they want to shout something up then I'm not going to ignore them. I suspect that the phone would be going quite a lot which I will probably answer, I think my mum will probably call me or something like that but I don't think I'm going to be standing there in some kind of spiritual kind of silence I mean that's not me really I'm quite talkative. So I guess I would be nattering quite a lot up there yes.

And why would you say you've chosen to go down that route rather than doing something for the crowds?

Because I'm just not an exhibitionist, you know, I'm just ... there's a lot of pressure on you, funnily enough, when you accept this place because all of a sudden it's like why don't you go up there and wear a t shirt supporting this breast cancer charity? Or why don't you do something? And it's like God, you know, and then, you know, if you sign up to the press interviews which I'm sure a lot of people have done, including myself, I mean I'm a journalist, I can hardly, you know, say no to doing press interviews. And I expect so many people to be interviewed by me, you know, you get asked by people what are you going to do up there? And when you are talking to a local newspaper reporter who wants to give you half page spread in the paper and photographs and stuff, it actually seems a bit rubbish to say actually I don't think I'm going to do anything, you know, you kind of feel pressured to come up with something a little bit mad. But, you know, essentially if I was to go up there and do something that wasn't in my nature, it would be a very uncomfortable experience and I just don't want it to be that, I want it to be a fantastic experience. I want to come off feeling exactly the same as that guy that's been on there now, the poet that went up and spent the whole hour just writing and thinking and trying to be inspired for his next book. He came off and just said that was just completely for me and I loved it and that's how I want it to be, I want it to be for me and not for anybody else.

So having said that, who would you say you are doing it for?

I'm doing it for myself first and foremost. I mean my partner, Malcolm, who is in the other room, he works for a music venue that has been closed in Manchester for quite a few years. It's re-opening in September and he's a marketing man, you know, so there's been a bit of gentle pressure from him, from me to give a few plugs to that. So I kind of agreed to do that, but that's really as far as it goes in terms of doing stuff for anybody else. It has to be about what I want to do and if I go up there and pretend to be something I'm not or feel pressured to doing something for someone else that

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makes me feel uncomfortable then it will just be an hour of hell rather than, you know, me being inspired and happy that I took part in this.

What do you hope happens when you get up?

That's a really interesting question, what I hope happens, really I hope I get ignored really, you know. It's not actually that busy out there at the moment. I was looking at the website earlier and it was rammed and oh my God you know, yes, I actually hope that I get ignored. I hope that I can just kind of, you know, I'm going to move around and all that and as I said before I'm sure that I'm going to have the odd phone conversation but actually I want to be one of those figures on a plinth that people walk past and take for granted really. I want to be one of those. I don't want to be the centre of attention at all.

Have you got any fears about going up?

That someone throws a kebab at me, that's probably my biggest fear because I know that's happened. Have I got any fears? Not really, you know, what can possibly go wrong? Famous last words. I bet I kind of fall over in these heels or something. I'm wearing the most inappropriate footwear in the world.

Can you tell us a bit more about your work?

I'm a documentary maker I was eleven years at the BBC and I went freelance two years ago. I went freelance because I wanted much more variety in terms of what I make. So I went freelance and I've made a really good range of stuff. I mean I just finished a *Dispatches* for Channel 4 which was presented by Sheree Blair the wife of our former prime minister Tony. Last year I made a documentary for ITV, the actress Leslie Ash about her terrible lip problem when she entered all that filler into her lips and it all went a bit weird. I did an investigation into the BBC News where I exposed Manchester sweatshops making stuff for Primark and it's been quite interesting over the last two years. The kind of sheer, open scale of stuff that I've made has been quite interesting so even though being a freelancer can be a bit dicey, okay, you think you know when am I going to get my next job and also everything you do you put immense pressure on yourself to be the best at it because you know everything, you are only as good as your last piece of work. There is that but, you know, the fact that I've been able to branch out into different directions and have such a varied CV has been really good.

We are trying to build up a picture of the participants.

Hmm.

Would you mind telling me what's important to you right now in your life?

What's important to me in my life ... you've just asked me about my work, funnily enough another reason I went freelance, it's because I wanted to try and scale it back a bit, you know. I've been through quite a lot personally, you know. My husband as I said he died three years ago. A few months after that death I ended up having a

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hip replacement because I ended up developing osteoarthritis so, excuse me, so dealing with the bereavement, having to be hospitalised, you know, having to change my life both mentally and physically because, you know, I can't do the kind of exercise that I used to be able to do and obviously my life has changed a hell of a lot since Damien died anyway, you know. It's been three years now and I am actually now in another relationship living a completely different life, you know. I'm trying to get my head around that; it's weird because sometimes you have this sway of home sickness for the life you used to have with someone else. I guess it's all part of the bereavement process because it's still on going three years later and, you know, I'm thirty seven, you know, thirty eight in February, hurtling towards forty. I've put a hell of a lot into my career and I feel as if I need to step back and say okay, why don't I put as much effort into my personal life? Why don't I now think about having some children? Why don't I now think about not living in the UK for a bit?

You know, after Damien died, I rather weirdly went and bought this ramshackle weird house in the middle of the Bulgarian countryside that's just been renovated. It looks amazing. Bulgaria is a fascinating country because it's just only gone into the EEU it's scared, it's really got its communist scars still and it's just ... I find it quite a fascinating country so why don't I go and live six months there which is so far removed from the life I'm used to? So that's really what is going on with me at the moment. I feel as if I need to make a lot of changes. The job, the world of television has become incredibly stressful; there's less money to make programmes so you are doing everything on a shoe string, you are having to work harder, there's less people around to help. You don't get a researcher anymore, you used to get a researcher and an assistant. People have been cut out of the food chain and therefore you are having to devote so much of your own time and I just don't want to sort of look back at myself at forty and say oh yes I've got a few million viewers for that programme but oh my God, where are the children, where's my life? So it feels like counselling this, but do you know what I mean, it's ... that needs to change and it will do, it will definitely change.

Do you spend a lot of time in Bulgaria?

I have since I bought the house which was just after, well, Damien died in the July and I bought the house the following January just before I had the hip replacement and since then I've been going twice a year mainly to oversee the work that has been going on the house. I'm going there on Saturday for four days to sign off completely the work that has been done and then it's a case of just going there and enjoying the house for what it is. It's been a bit of a building site over the last few years but I really, really like it there, very simple life, as I say, it's really far removed from what I'm used to. So when I go there everything is tripped right back you know. I don't get phone calls, I can't watch telly, there's no broadband connection in the village so I can't go on the internet - the only thing that I can really do is read, listen to music, go for walks, maybe go into the local town and have something to eat, you know, meet up with my Bulgarian friends which I have got many now who invite me around there to eat. And they live very simple lives and people come around to the house with ... it sounds really idyllic but it's true, people come around to the house with sorts of baskets of eggs for you and vegetables. They give you stuff from their gardens whereas we live this life in Manchester where we are peeling cling film off wraps of

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trays of food, bunging it in the oven, eating it at 8 o'clock at night because that's the only time we get home from work.

I just want all of that to change really, I've been going to Bulgaria quite a lot. I've fallen in love with it, it's got its problems it needs sorting out you know, it needs a really good injection of European money which it won't get until it sorts out, it's a bit of an issue with corruption at the heart of its government and also organised crime and mafia and stuff like that so it's kind of a ... it's a bit of a problem. They are a bit of a ... they are kind of almost stopping themselves from getting help but I'm convinced it's a country that is moving forward. I hope I'm around in sort of five / ten years time still having a relationship with that country and see how much it has progressed.

I'm aware that we are running out of time, but how would you summarise your experience since you applied and up to now?

Well my experience, as I say, because I was so kind of busy I would say that even though this One & Other thing has been going on for quite a few months I'd probably say that it's only in the last sort of couple of weeks since I've started having direct contact with you guys, because you've had to call me to make the arrangements, and so it's something that has really kind of happened in the last few weeks. I went out on a shopping spree the other day and bought some new clothes to wear. It just gave me something to really look forward to. I knew when that difficult television project was over I would come and be doing this so it's been a short journey in a sense that I, it's only in the last couple of weeks that I started to deal with it but like everything else in my life, it's here, I'll deal with it and I think, you know, I hope that I'm going to come off that plinth feeling as excited about this project as I am now before I go on it.

Great, thank you.

END OF RECORDING