

The UP Podcast: Rush Me by Sonia E Barrett Transcript

Emma Underhill 0:10

Thank you, Lili. Hi, I'm Emma Underhill. I'm a white woman with blonde shoulder length hair. I have blue glasses and my pronouns are she/her. I'm really pleased to welcome you to The Hall today and to share the beginnings of *Rush Me* by Sonia E. Barrett, which is the latest commission of our digital programme, *This is Public Space*, as well as to look ahead to the next episode of *The UP Podcast*, a new podcast series, curated and commissioned by UP Projects and hosted by today's chair, the writer and critic, Hettie Judah. The next episode in the podcast series, will explore the themes, processes, and implications surrounding Sonia Barrett's commission. *Rush Me* is due to launch later this year in June, and taking the Windrush Generation as it's starting point, the project explores narratives relating to migration, belonging, identity, and hybridity from an intergenerational perspective. UP Projects began reflecting on the complexity of narratives surrounding the Windrush Generation when we were appointed in 2020, to work with the Windrush Commemoration Committee, and the Department of Levelling Up Housing & Communities to support the process of selecting and commissioning an artist to create the first national monument to the Windrush Generation at London Waterloo Station. And Jamaican artist Basil Watson has recently been appointed to undertake this commission. I'm really pleased that curator Melanie Abraham is able to join us for today's discussion. She has been collaborating with us on the curation and the community engagement relating to the monument commission. UP Projects always strives to push the boundaries of what public art can be and what it can do. And we're incredibly excited to also have the opportunity to work with Sonia Barrett, who through her *Rush Me* commission, will utilise digital platforms to critically address and explore narratives and issues surrounding Windrush in a participatory way. We're also very excited to support her in translating her engagement processes, which is so central to her practice, into the digital realm in order to reach international and intergenerational audiences. So, I really hope you enjoy the event, and please stay tuned into the development of this commission and Sonia's episode of *The UP Podcast*, which will launch later this year. But now, without further ado, I'd like to introduce you to Hettie Judah who will outline the plan for the next hour and introduce you to our speakers. Hettie is Senior Art Critic on the British Daily Paper, *The Eye* and contributor to *Freeze*, *The Guardian*, *Vogue*, *The New York Times*, *Art Quarterly*, *Numéro* art and other publications with art in the title. Her recent books include *Art London*, *Lives of the Artists Frida Kahlo*, and *Caroline Walker Janet*. Her forthcoming book, *Lapidarium: The Secret Life of Stones*, will be published later

this year by John Murray. And a campaigner for the rights of artists parents, she's also currently working on a book on art and motherhood. So, Hettie over to you.

Hettie Judah 3:19

Thank you so much, Emma and thank you, Lili. Hello, I'm Hettie Judah, I'm a writer and the presenter of *The UP Podcast*. I'm a middle-aged woman of Jewish heritage and I have short dark hair and I'm wearing a collarless black shirt and I go by the pronouns she/her. So today, we're going to hear a little about two projects that UP is involved with in different ways this year. We're also celebrating The UP Podcast. So, I'd like to raise some of the interesting and quite provocative questions that have come up in the course of the first two episodes, with Shezad Dawood and Jasleen Kaur, while I'm talking with Sonia and Melanie in a moment. I'm going to start off today by inviting both Sonia and Melanie to give a short presentation about their work. Sonia is then going to lead us all through a participatory activity that's going to take about 20 minutes. And I think for that you'll need some string or wool or perhaps a pen and paper. Sonia will explain that - that will take us about 20 minutes, and at the end of the activity, Sonia, Melanie and I will move into a conversation. We'll have a bit of time at the end for questions. So, I'd like to start off by inviting Sonia to come and tell us a little bit about her work.

Sonia Barrett 4:34

Hello Hettie, Hello everyone. My name is Sonia Barrett. I'm mixed race, I've got quite unkempt curly hair, flat curly hair, and I'm wearing a black cardigan. I have a presentation to share, my pronouns are she/her. It's just a really short presentation about some of the things that I've been doing to date. So, my practice starts really, is grounded in an understanding of, well starts with slavery. I'm just going to share my screen now. So, my work really started with it trying to think about what is the connection between people who care; caregivers in terms of contact, people who give close bodily contact care to other people. So that's people who work in motherhood, in the sex industry, people who are in situations of modern-day slavery. I thought about the points of contact of all these different types of labour, often, which are unremunerated. And really started to begin to think about modern-day slavery. And modern-day slavery is something that we've got, we have today, it's like, it's a thing that we've still got today. And most, the average cost of a slave in the United States is about \$90. There in excess, there's a slave imported into the country, every 30 minutes and 50% of slaves, modern-day slaves are in the sex industry. I was thinking about how this relates to furniture and how we sit on a chair without even looking at a chair, and it supports your entire weight, but in a very intimate way. I wondered whether there was a kind of a link between the metaphor for chairs or furnitures, and people that we overlook, but who support us and support us entirely. So, can you see my screen? I'm sharing, so I have works which deal with furniture; which changes and which becomes - moves from being object to being a person so that we can align personhood and

objectification, who can think about empathy and how can we begin to empathise with those that we we've objectified? Recently, I've worked on large scale projects, which have dealt with bringing people together to create large immersive spaces that we can all share. So large sculptural works that are maybe aerial works, but also works that exist in the room taking up space. And I've brought together lots of collectives in order to make those pieces. So, one is *Sky*, which is a work that I made in Florence in The Villa Romana. And it's using hair, hair that was donated to me from members of the black community. So, it creates this huge afro-sky of like billowing clouds. Then another recent work has been at the Royal Geographic Society where I've collated a map collective in order to braid maps. And we shredded archival maps and braided them and created a large, immersive space where you could just come into and try to begin to unpack and unpick the braiding of the map. And the braiding of the map was beginning to try to make a - intervene in this mapmaking process, which is the keystone - key of starting to open up landscapes in ways for colonial practices. It begins with mapping, and so how do we unmake this map? So, we grounded a map collective in order to do that. And so those are the kind of works that I've been doing, also have been making digital work, mostly with GIFs that are very easy to just to disseminate and so, evade art spaces, because they work without them. Then I'd like to hand over to Melanie.

Hettie Judah 9:52

Thank you so much, Sonia. Melanie, would you like to join us for your presentation?

Melanie Abrahams 9:58

Thank you. It's great to be here. My description is I'm a middle-aged woman, I'm mixed race wearing a navy, white and blue dress, my pronouns are she/her. A number of people call me ethnically ambiguous, and this doesn't help anyone. But I guess it means no one race stands out. And I'm not black, nor am I white. But I'd say I have long black hair that looks straight, but actually has an invisible curl. I'm primarily a curator, a producer and a mentor. And over two decades, I've been channelling my love of words and books, which I had from a very early age into projects and initiatives. But I haven't done that; from early childhood, I was very much a late starter. I was someone that found a refuge in books. And in some ways it sort of saved my life in terms of I think I could have gone a very different way and sort of within a sort of household and sort of early environments, which were very constrictive. I managed to sort of find ways into creativity and curiosity, but also into exploring diversity, not just diversity in terms of my mixed race, heritage, but also diversity of voice. And so, I'm really interested nowadays, as a mentor and a curator, in this aspect of voice, not just the voice that we might find within the literature, art form and the spoken word, but how we might bring out our own respective voices, whatever discipline we might use. I'm also interested in diversity, not just being around race and background, but being around multiplicity. And I think it's ever more important these days, given that we're in such an

intersectional and fragmented world of so many constellations, and you can't ever tell where anyone is from or what they're up to, or what they're about from looking at them. So we really, I feel have to explore this and I really enjoy doing that. Through my practice, as a curator and a producer, I love spending lots of time with artists and with individuals, and getting behind them and their work, and their sensibilities, and then looking at ways in which I can create and bring certain platforms and projects to bear that might bring either their voice or a form of articulation together. And often this might mean that I'm working with an ensemble of people. And other times it might mean I'm working more intimately with one person and bringing things to bear very collaboratively. At the moment, I'm working on an intergenerational and intersectional project called *This is Who We Are*, which is about women of colour. Women of colour is also potentially a problematic term, but the group of us within the project are using it as a way in which we are building solidarity and an understanding together. We come from different heritages. And it's for artists and creatives who are based in Australia, and in Britain. And we have sponsorship and funding from the British Council as part of their UK Australia programme. And the idea is that we're looking at indigeneity and aspects of First Nations heritage as well as some of the kind of invisible intersectional kind of identities that we have. I'm half Trinidadian and half Jamaican. In addition to sort of African and Chinese heritage, as well as European heritage, I was told sort of early on that I had sort of Carib ancestry from the Trinidadian part of myself. But what I found kind of growing up, and I'm really interested in this part of kind of Caribbean heritage is the kind of invisibility of looking at indigeneity. And looking at this aspect of indigenous heritages within the Caribbean and looking at what might happen if, centuries later, we're kind of then building on soil, and on space and place, which has been moved and fragmented, but also which has involved the death and the slaughter of people that we're not currently recognising historically. So, I'm really interested in how we might come to our ways of defining diversity in a more articulate an ever-expanding way. Thank you.

Hettie Judah 14:21

Thank you so much, Melanie. It's so fascinating listening to both of you talking. I wish we had kind of four or five hours this afternoon because so much I want to unpack from the questions that you brought up, so many interesting questions and ideas already coming up. But for the moment, I'm going to hand over to Sonia who's going to lead us through a participatory activity and Sonia, you can perhaps explain a little more. It's going to involve some polls and some activities. And I will see everyone again in 20 minutes or so.

Sonia Barrett 14:56

Hello, So UP asked me to do a creative activity that might start to open up some of the ideas that I'll be thinking about in the project. And I just thought what we would

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do was just do a little bit of journaling together in the space and then make something. This is a really informal activity; I'm just going to take you through about six questions. Then if you've got your string, ready, or if you haven't, you can go and get it. And then we can see what we can do with our string. So, if you can either think about the answers to these questions, or write them down, whichever you prefer. So, some of the questions there will be a poll for which will be a question that's not individually important, like not individually emotional, but the others might be a bit, a bit more challenging, but we don't, we won't be sharing any answers to any personal information in this space. So, feel safe. So, the first question is really, what is the hardest thing you've been asked to do in your life? Just think about that, and just put an answer down. Anything that you think, think is difficult? What was maybe the hardest thing in your life? And the second question is, in what way was that a journey? In the sense that there was a beginning to your knowing about needing to do this thing, and a transition stage, then maybe, when the thing happened, and like, in what way was it a journey? I think there should be a poll now. Somewhat, not at all? Okay. Okay. And then third question is - thank you for your responses - how does that relate, if at all, to your ancestral past? Like this difficult decision - does it relate to your ancestry or not? And that's just something for you to privately think about. The fourth question; how does this hard ask relate to your lived life now? And potentially, to your future, in which ways? And the fifth question is, how much agency did you have? Were you able to refuse? Were you able to refuse this ask? There's a poll coming up now about that, you can respond in the poll, just whether you were able to or you weren't. Then privately to think about, what would refusal have cost you, if you had said no? Just a private thing to think about. Or if you if you said yes, what would it have cost you to say no? And if you said no, what would that have cost you to say yes? And now our final question, second to last question. Could you imagine asking the person that asked you to do this thing to do something of a similar magnitude? There's a poll here; perhaps, yes, unlikely, no. So that hard ask that was asked of you, could you have asked that of the other person, the person who's asking you? Okay, so that is our final, that is our final question. It's so interesting, the responses to this. Maybe we can unpack that some of those responses later on. So, if you do have your string, now would be a great time to grab it. I would just like to give you some time maybe like just 10 minutes or so. To do this activity and with the string, I would like you to draw using points in your room with a string. Either the journey, if you felt it was a journey, this difficult thing you were asked to do. Or if you didn't feel you had a journey there, your refusal, or your acquiescence using the string. If you take the string, you can think about where - most of you will be at home, I imagine - wherever you are, think about where you're going to situate this. It'll be a kind of sculptural outcome, but it's also drawing. If you don't feel confident to do that, you can also just draw those lines on a piece of paper with a pen. So, you're going to be moving the string to kind of illustrate the feeling of the refusal, the acquiescence or the journey, whichever.

We're going to have a space; you're going to have about 10 minutes to do that. There'll be a space for you to upload those. Then it'll be collated, and it'll be just really, I think, really interesting, just to see these different spaces and these different structures that arise. So, we'll just take a break there to do that. And see you back in about a time about 10 minutes. Hettie. What do you have you feel?

Hettie Judah 21:58

Sure 10 minutes.

Sonia Barrett 22:00

Okay. And when you're done, you can upload here onto the Padlet. There will be someone explaining how to do that now...Okay, I think we're coming into the last two minutes. Is that right? Hettie? Yes. So, if you haven't managed to upload to the Padlet, that's fine, you can do so later on. We can share those at another time. And think about that a bit today. Just the experience of doing it as valuable, not necessarily documenting what you've done.

Hettie Judah 22:47

Thank you so much, Sonia. And thank you everybody who participated in that and who also participated in the polls that Sonia put up for us. Sonia, I'd like to start off by talking a little bit about *Rush Me*. I wondered if you could tell me about, just very simply how I'll be engaging with work. When I'm wanting to experience *Rush Me*, how do I come into it? What will I encounter?

Sonia Barrett 23:20

So, *Rush Me* is going to be, so it's a digital space in the digital realm - oh there's wonderful things coming in - in a digital realm and will be coming into a space to think about Windrush in a new way. So not in the way that we've been, we've been thinking about it up to date. And what I'm really hoping to do is to create an interactive space, starting with a short video, and the video will be different depending on who comes in and when they're coming in. And that video will open up a lot of questions about Windrush and about a difficult ask. So really rewinding the whole Windrush thing to be before people get on the boat, and to really try to open up and think about, what was the ask, and in what context did that ask happen. Very much like some of the questions we've been thinking about today. What kind of refusals possible? Where, where could we travel with this? How has it affected our generations, further generations? And how does it relate to this kind of ask that has happened from Empire in the past? And was it always an ask? And is it an ask now? So just to really unpack all of those things. And so, in the activity that we've just done, some of those questions have come in terms of personal experiences that you that we all here have had. And that's what I really want to do. So, it'll be a space where people, individuals will have an avatar will be able to move through the space, will be able to deal with some of these questions in terms of

their own personal histories in order to build empathy for that hard ask to migrate. Yes, but also to unpack the history of migration to this country. And *Rush Me* is an ambiguous title, with an idea of opening up this beyond one particular boat on one particular day; on one particular boat in one particular day in one particular country, so that we can start to think about the Windrush, quote, unquote, the "Windrush experience" as a kind of portal into many experiences of migration. Choice, chosen, forced through like this grey space, and really unpack that in terms of to just expand it into this into this international context. And also, be aware of the international context in which Windrush happened wasn't simply just between the Caribbean, or even just one island, Jamaica and one dock in the UK.

Hettie Judah 26:22

And from what I understand of the proposal for the work, that there's also a sense that different people in different generations will experience the work in different ways.

Sonia E Barrett 26:32

Yes.

Hettie Judah 26:33

So, imagining that you're hoping to evoke, or raise different kinds of questions in the different kinds of users through - users is a terrible word - the different audiences that might encounter work, can you talk us through some of those kinds of questions and the different kinds of perspectives you're hoping to bring in.

Sonia Barrett 26:53

So, my work, the work that I've been doing in the communities and black communities to date has really led me to think that there's often a kind of a generational divide. And there are some issues with intergenerational contact past a certain age group. And so, what I'm really interested in doing is creating a virtual space where these different generations can meet, so putting them in ways that are attractive to different, to different groups, different audiences, and then having them meet in this in this space and maybe tackle some of these questions together, or separately and then see each other's answers and really think about how, what's changed, what still remains the same? What are the touchstones then are still here? Because unfortunately, the situation for the Windrush people who came here from the Windrush shouldn't even before or after, is their situation remains unresolved as to questions of citizenship. And yes, I really want to open all those things up into also into the contemporary space and the contemporary issues that we're dealing with now.

Hettie Judah 28:12

So, is the idea that people will, they won't just do a kind of one-shot engagement with the work, they will come, they will have a kind of ongoing engagement with the work, and they'll be outcomes that are presented to them over time?

Sonia Barrett 28:26

Yes, I want it to build and it's so it will grow organically. And I can't really say at this point, because it's not really in my hands. I mean, I can create the framework, but what will come into those spaces, what questions will be important, what people will dialogue, what will emerge as people use and engage with the space. And that's really the interesting thing for me, but I feel that it's really interesting to unpack the history, the international history of Windrush and also, the contemporary resonance of the claims of Windrush generations, which is still not being met many people who are affected by Windrush, are dying before their compensation reaches them. And issues of citizenship have been widened presently. And I just think that all those things. I'm hoping all these things will come into the room as well, but it's not for me to say.

Hettie Judah 29:28

Thank you so much, Melanie, I'd like to kind of loop in some of the ideas that Sonia has brought up in her presentation and in the chat just now. And kind of relate it into your work a little bit. Sonia has brought up this really important question, I think of creating spaces that people can share - creating shared spaces. And it strikes me that this is really much, pretty much at the heart of what you do, really. And I'd like you to talk perhaps a little bit about how we might go about creating shared spaces and why they're important and the kinds of conversations that we might be wanting to have in the shared spaces for the moment.

Melanie Abrahams 30:11

Yeah, I mean, for me, shared spaces are important in that, unless you want to be working with yourself or focusing on yourself, it's important to engage and connect with others. And I suppose from the point of view of, say, the work that I've been doing, as the curator in the community engagement consultant with UP Projects on the *Windrush Monument*, it's important because shared spaces have been denied to a number of Caribbeans, and people who are part of, you know, the so called Windrush generations and the generations that followed. So connection, and aspects of conviviality and aspects of shared experience and sharing knowledge is really important for them. In terms of having groundings and connection points, but also being able to experience cultures that might have been fractured. Then from a curatorial, and I guess, an artistic and creative point of view, shared spaces are important I feel because we want to reflect and engage with people in audiences. But we also want to reflect the complex nature of Britain and the kind of way that it's constantly changing, but also was ever thus. There was always a complexity and a diversity to Britain. In some ways, we're now more, were more

nowadays, kind of articulating what that complexity was, you know, and in some ways, we're kind of reinventing the wheel by articulating and re-articulating these things. But it's a good thing in that it makes us, it gives us a sense of awareness, and a sense of iteration in terms of the way that we might define things. So I think those things are important for those many reasons. But also, I think it should be something which is enjoyable, and which is a fun part of practice, and not just a chore or something we feel that we have to do that's driven by policy or procedure. You know, for me, like doing that is a really fun and interesting thing to be because I like to be around people and I like the complexity of what it offers.

Hettie Judah 32:33

I'm interested in what I kind of perhaps falsely see as a bit of a tension between a space and a monument, because they're things that function quite differently, potentially in a public sphere. And obviously, it's an extremely I mean, it's, I'm searching for an adequate description. It's a turbulent and emotional and charged time for monuments at the moment, to talk about monuments in the public sphere. And I'm sure there were lots of questions and considerations that came up in proposing a *Windrush Monument*. I'd like to hear a little bit about those kinds of questions that were raised. Because it's not as straightforward thing to propose at all at this point.

Melanie Abrahams 33:15

Well, I guess the name itself, so Windrush in that there were other boats and ships, there were other ways that people, you know, travelled to England: by plane, there were lots of different forms of travel. So, I guess one of the key questions is why Windrush? Why that kind of emphasis? And then does that negate the other experiences of people? Then of course there's the aspects of the Windrush scandal, and what that evokes and what that continues to evoke, and some of the kind of contemporary ramifications of that and the very urgent kind of issues that need to be addressed around that. And then I suppose there are organisations and entities with the name Windrush and then it will be a thing of, is there then a propensity to kind of look at them, and then not to kind of look at the diversity of, you know, the many organisations whose work and endeavours are about equity, for Caribbeans and West Indian peoples as well. So those are some of the kinds of issues around it. Then I guess there's the aspect of the monument or the edifice itself in terms of, you know, the problematics around monuments and what's been happening in the last couple of years with regards to some monuments being torn down and, you know, issues around the kind of, aspect of what a monument could and should look like, you know, so all of these things have kind of come into play. And I think it's important that we have these kinds of vigorous examinations, but also they're looked at from the point of view of a multiplicity of different backgrounds and in particular that they looked upon with regards to the care and the wellbeing of Caribbeans. Because if this is something which is, you know, going

to be a marker and in some form of celebration, and again, we need to use the term celebration kind of guardedly, but if it is marking the endeavours and the achievements and the great value and wealth that Caribbeans have literally brought to Britain, then also it needs to include their contributions and their insights and their thoughts, particularly nowadays, and not just in some, in the ways that it might be, you know, kind of preserved in aspect and kind of seen as something that is historical, but something that's very much about the lived experiences of Caribbeans today.

Hettie Judah 35:53

Yeah, I mean, that was one thing I wanted to ask is, you know, what is it a monument to? Is it a monument to a historical episode? Is it a monument to a generation is, you know, that it's, as you say, it's such a complex, and I guess, ultimately, unresolved question. And I think the question of why now is also really interesting. I mean, why is it important at this moment to create a monument to this generation, to this historical episode?

Melanie Abrahams 36:23

Well, for me, I would say things like this, aspects of marking the contributions of Caribbeans is, it's not just timely, but it's, you know, one would argue that it could have happened a long time ago. You know and this particular project was in the works for a very long time, it's taken some time for it to kind of come through. So, for me, my response would be why not now? You know, and why not 10 years ago. So, you know, I think, and also these things, often, they're often unfortunately, waves of interest, and kind of, you know, kind of beams of light on particular kind of communities at any one time, you know, within our kind of citizenry. So, I think, if not now, then when, and maybe it also needs to be seen as an important opportunity, and not just an opportunity for the sake of it. But certainly, given the precarity of our times, I think it would be wasteful, for it not to go ahead as well, there's that kind of issue, you know, there's been a great deal of thought and preparation that's gone into it and a great deal of preplanning. So, for me, there's this aspect of seeing things through, which have had their time, and which are, you know, due to kind of surface as well.

Hettie Judah 37:48

Thank you so much. And, of course, you know, in talking about creating shared space, that's not only necessarily a physical space, that can also be a digital space. And Sonia I'd like to chat with you a little bit about what working in the digital realm brings to your work. You shared a little bit of your sculptural work, and well you told us a little bit about it, we didn't see so much. I mean, you're, when you're working as a sculptor, you're dealing with incredibly intense, historically laden materials, you're very aware of aspects of touch and care. And, and this kind of historical weight that sits on various forms. So, what changes for you as you enter

the digital sphere? Does it bring new audiences? Are there different ways that you can behave? Is it to do with creating this shared space in a different way?

Sonia Barrett 38:41

Yes...you've really noticed something that's definitely part of my practice, it is very much about touch and about care and about the physical objects and its history. But I am a reluctant digital artist, and I was forced into the digital realm when I'd lost like, it's this precariousness of like losing your space and losing your studio and not having the ability to create. Then I realised that I just had to work with just my laptop. And I still had a laptop that was working. And that was great. So I started to make digital work, because I knew there were things I still needed to do things, but I couldn't do them in a physical way. I had been invited to digital conferences, and they kind of do start saying, like, not everyone who's here wants to be here. Some of us are not like I'm here because of lack. You know, and but the thing that I was very glad of this push, because it enabled me to make work that circulated in whole new ways. I hadn't realised it and when I had digital commission, I made a number of works and then one was selected, and I was told definitely these are not, we were not selecting these were selecting these and it was very interesting for me to be able to share those other works just through digital networks. So I made GIFs and just they were sent through phones. And actually, I could see that they had reached a lot of so many people in the Caribbean and so many people here in the UK, and they travelled also to America. And it was it was a different agency that I discovered in the digital space that I thought was really exciting. And I just think that there's just this possibility. Many of the issues that are problematic with sculpture, where sculpture ends - kind of often there is a very intimate contact between you and the work. But then, where does it all go? How does it build? And the wonderful thing about the digital space is that if we start to think about things and respond there, then those responses can pile and it can be like kind of like a compost, like all these different things. And it can sit and get older and other people can respond. And I just think that that's really also a type of monument and one that's going to be very useful. And some people in the Caribbean it's always good to have, like art and utility to bring those things together. I think that's does it do something as well as this? I quite like that aesthetic I think that's yeah, interesting.

Hettie Judah 41:39

I mean, I guess one thing that's really interesting about the digital realm is that it's not geographically specific. So, you can, in creating this work, you can also, people can be experiencing it all over the world for a start, so it doesn't just engage with people in Britain. But it also that you, that it very much is public space, because you're escaping from, you know, all of the, that kind of cultural weight of the museum, the cultural weight of the gallery, all of the problematics that that brings with it. But I can see that there are also questions of not only who it invites, but

also who it excludes, to a certain extent as well, is that something you've had to be quite conscious of?

Sonia Barrett 42:23

It's something I thought about when putting together my proposal, and then I'm very much aware that the digital realm has different generations are more or less in digital space for different amounts of time. And so, I was very interested in how can this digital work also combine with physical interaction in actual real spaces, and as part of the commission, there will be like events and in real time in real rooms, bringing people together, that will then move into the digital space. So just to try and open up what it means to contribute or how easy it is to contribute. I think that those things are very important. But I also think that we also sometimes undermine the capacity, the scope of digitisation, if the thing that I've been determined to do from the outset is to keep it at such a level of technical, like a technical level, so that it can be accessed by phones, not even the most latest smartphones, but just, you know, so it can be open on a computer or on a laptop on a phone, but not only the latest technology, but we also underestimate the digitisation of spaces and how that has happened. Also, I've also realised, from working with elders that a lot of them are very good with iPads, and it's actually kind of not necessarily a thing. Sometimes you think there's something there, but it's not really there. So, I feel like it really is a space where we can meet as long as the project stays in that technical spec space. So, I'm actually quite excited about that.

Hettie Judah 44:28

Melanie when you're commissioning works that are there specifically to engage communities, how important is it to bring in all kinds of different media? Do they play different roles? Do you have to have quite a multi, you were talking about multiplicity earlier, which I know you talk about in terms of people, but I mean in terms of media as multiplicity also very important, should we be always thinking about having multiple aspects to any commission?

Melanie Abrahams 44:55

I guess for me, it's about looking at the intention and what it is that either I or the group of people that I'm collaborating with, what it is that we want to do and what it is that we want to say. And who it is that we might be presenting, or enabling a platform if say, we're working in that kind of context, and then making sure that we reflect it with either the right form or the right combination of forms. So I think, in some ways, the art forms present themselves depending on what the voice happens to be, and what the things are that we happen to say. So, I sort of came to literature, as someone who had a lot of sort of verve and effervescence about the possibilities of words and kind of making words sing and making sure that words were centre stage. And what I realised sort of earlier on is, there was an industry of

book publishing, and it was very dominant. And what was happening is because people hadn't really cottoned on a way for audio to kind of become centre stage, this was long before audible, and in some ways, one could argue that even now, oratory and spoken word is very much a kind of small segment of the kind of literature industry, because people still haven't yet found a way to kind of monetize it. And, for me I found that a bit problematic because for me, it was about looking at where talent lay and looking at where voices and the possibilities were for them. So, I guess what I've been doing is I've been looking at ways in which I might be of value, in particular, where there might be gaps. And that's a way to be creative. And that's the way to be distinctive. So I didn't necessarily want to kind of join the team. But I wanted as an independent artist and creative to kind of look at ways in which I might kind of foster more variegation where there was lack. And I think Sonia's also referred to this aspect of lack. And I think it very much kind of plays within a practice where perhaps you come from Heritage's where lack is very prevalent in one's life. And what you're doing is you're trying to creatively but also innovatively address that in a way in which you're kind of moving forward with that level of self-determination and trying to kind of change the script and kind of make things more dynamic where you find those possibilities. And for me iteration is a really good way of doing that because you're not necessarily sure where you're going in terms of the final journey. But if you can iterate along the way there, you can make the most of any of the resources that you have at your disposal at any time.

Hettie Judah 47:49

Yeah, I mean, I'm also interested in how important it is not only to create a shared space or to create a shared platform, but to animate it, or to give people the opportunity to be animated within it as well. And that perhaps some, sometimes it's important to provide a stimulus as well. So, it's all very well, for example, creating a public space or creating a monument or creating a platform. But then, we need to invite people to animate it to invite people to share as well within that. So, part of that has also to do with facilitating a space for voice facilitating the expression as well.

Melanie Abrahams 48:29

Yeah, and I think part of that is dealing with the fear that some institutions and organisations and individuals might have if you enable those platforms for people to speak freely. So, I think a lot of the time some of these things don't happen, because there might be a fear of losing control. Whereas for me, I think there is a kind of freedom with this kind of aspect of, you know, enabling voice. And I guess one can do it in a careful way, because I think, not only curation involves care and there's the kind of Latin definition of curare, you know, to care for. But I think producing also necessitates levels of care. And so, I don't think it's necessarily a good idea to kind of willy nilly, like, allow everyone to kind of speak and create, you

know, some kind of fable, which then kind of gets out of hand. But at the same time, it can be a lovely thing and an important thing, to allow those kind of multiplicity and variegation of voices, which will not only inform us of where we happen to be within this time in history, but it will also propel the project forward creatively and the way that it needs to go. You know, and I say, I think sometimes there needs to be a level of openness to that practice, that is a practice of enabling people to speak.

Hettie Judah 49:53

Yeah, I think well, I mean, one of the big questions really, that's coming up at this moment when we're debating monuments, is how do we avoid that kind of monolithic way of erecting monuments? And how do we create space with public art that engages with the nuance of historical episodes rather than just kind of presenting an attitude presenting one point of view. Before we wind up, I'd like to talk with you both a bit about artists working with community, because this is something that very much came up in the chat I had with Jasleen Kaur a few months ago. We were talking quite a bit about, actually, you know, what a big thing it is for an artist to engage in a kind of wholehearted way with work with the community, and how you might make that sustainable both for the community and for the artist. It seems that there's you know, there's quite a kind of disjunction between the pace at which the art world quite often functions, where it wants to kind of fund the project and the project then has a kind of flatline underneath it and ends. And actually, what relationships are like in the real world, and the kind of open minded, open hearted, open armed approach that you perhaps need to have in engaging the community, or how you then you know, create kind of boundaries, you set boundaries. And since you, Sonia, I know you've worked quite a lot with communities in the past, and as have you Melanie, I'd really love to hear from both of you how you think we can kind of create a sustainable model for artists to work with communities?

Sonia Barrett 51:39

I think that work with, it seems really at the moment, I feel it really seems to be down to the artist because you, yourself have to set those limiters. I, after doing two or three projects I was like okay, these are still ongoing, this is still - I'm still emailing, there is still chatting, this is...I'm cautious about taking on another community project. I think that all work with so called, communities is, you know, it's not to be undertaken lightly, you have to ask yourself so many questions. Like, who are you to do this? What do you bring? Like, why are you there? And I think that if you can go over all those hurdles, then naturally, your demand of communities you can learn with or be delimited. So, it's not something you can do it easily. I mean, some people do, but I think that can be problematic. And so, but even that delimiter can make you, can still leave you with those issues. If you're honest, when you go in about what you're able to do and what you can't do, then

you can set up a space of a sustainable relationship. So that would be the first thing I think to think about, like when you when you enter into community, are you promising something that you possibly can't deliver? Or are there things that people are reading into what you're saying that you haven't understood? And that requires a great deal of clarity and time and also trust because people will not tell you straight away what they think about an artist or what they think about artists or what their experience with artists has been. So, if you set those things up, then I think that's really the best. That's the really best safeguard for both you and for the community that you're working with. And if you're part of that community, already, it doesn't get any easier. So just to keep, to keep that rigour I think is really important.

Hettie Judah 53:53

Melanie, do you have any kind of pointers that perhaps public arts organisations should bear in mind when they're thinking about commissioning an artist to work or to engage the community in a project?

Melanie Abrahams 54:07

I think a good consideration is, is it the right time to be doing this? And do I have the things at my disposal? You know, what might I need to be able to make this a meaningful project or level of engagement. And thinking also where you factor in within this community? Like, are you part of that community? Are you outside of that community? Are you looking at as a kind of community of human beings or are you, you know, like, look at your definition of community, I think, is important. And also, I think that the kind of initiatives that tend to work better, are those where there's an approach, a community approach - an approach towards community rather than seeing it as this is a project where I'm going to work with the community for x number of months, and then I'm going to return to my general work. I think if there's a sort of approach to working with community, then you can essentially, learn and experience while doing but also take on board the opinions and viewpoints of the community that you're engaging with and let it unfold and iterate in the way that it needs to be.

Hettie Judah 55:19

Thank you. We've just got a little tiny bit of time for questions. We've got a question each for Melanie and for Sonia. Melanie, we have a question here, which says; What in your experience are the challenges in creating these shared spaces as a curator? And how have you overcome some of those challenges in your work? So quite a big question, but you can tackle that a little?

Melanie Abrahams 55:41

Yeah, thanks for that question. I mean, personally, for me, it's burn out in the I tend to go for really kind of large scale, envision, I can't even say the word. I try to

envisage things in a sort of large-scale unfolding way. Then occasionally, I might take on too much or be too wildly ambitious. So, I have to sort of, when I'm iterating, I need to sort of pace myself, and come back to the initial questions of why I'm doing this and not necessarily be too kind of wildly extravagant in my aims, particularly within these times where there's more kind of precarity and more kind of cautiousness around. Yeah, so I'd say that it's probably personally like being reflective and going back to the kind of the core values as to why I'm kind of doing it in the first place. And then the thing that I've come more into is, I used to be someone where I was enabling a lot of people enabling a lot of voices. But I think ultimately, within that is a question of how you enable yourself and how you enable your own voice. And that I think comes out for all of us as we grow older and wiser. And I think looking at ways in which you can enable your own voice, as well as enabling others is always an important thing to do within these spaces.

Hettie Judah 57:02

Thank you. And a question for Sonia. Sonia, how do you envisage engagement and participation taking place in a digital space?

Sonia Barrett 57:12

Well, I think that we will have some short videos, and the videos will be different and change, and there will be an opportunity to determine the course of the video. So that will be the first point of engagement, so you'll be actually actively determining the outcomes. And then they'll be opportunities in non-digital spaces, to think about, think about things and these will then enter a digital space. And then there'll be spaces, like rooms and spaces in the work to bring in your own responses to a number of questions, which will probably change and that will be all the different ways in which people will be able to interact, but also need to see how people want to construct that interaction because that will also be canvassed. So, there'll be like a lot of asking, and responding, so call and kind of call and response as to how to how to do this and which will hopefully find, find a way together, but it will start with this one visual video work which will open up a lot of things and then people can take, from go from there.

Hettie Judah 58:36

Thank you, I'm really excited to see it coming together later this year. In June, it will be so both the *Windrush Monument* and *Rush Me* should be unveiled in June. Thank you both so much. It's been so fascinating hearing some of the ideas that have informed both of your work. And I look forward very much to speaking with you both later in the year, hopefully for the Podcast, *The UP Podcast*. Sonia and Melanie, thank you both so much. and I think Lili might need to pop in and close things for today. But thank you everybody who's joined us, those who participated in the activity with Sonia and your contributions, your questions and answers to the polls. It's been a really interesting lunchtime chat.

Lili-Maxx Hager 59:22

Thank you so much. I can only second that. So, thank you so much to Hettie, Sonia, and Melanie, for such an insightful conversation. I think it's going to be really exciting to see how the podcast evolves and how that adds to this conversation that we've just had today. Thank you so much to the audience for participating and for the comments and questions you shared that have informed the discussion. Please do share any feedback you may have. You'll see in the Slido sidebar a questionnaire, which we would be really grateful if you could fill out before you leave today. We'll also be recording and uploading a recording of today's event on UP Projects YouTube, which will also include captions. You can continue to share your thoughts on the Padlet so please keep hold of the link which Jack our tech support will post in the chat now should you want to kind of continue to share your thoughts about the creative activity. *Rush Me* by Sonia E. Barrett is sponsored by Barrington Hibbert Associates and I would like to take a moment to thank them for their generous support. Last but by no means least thank you to Jack Newbury for helping out with all the technical issues and technical support today. Thank you all for attending. Bye, everyone.