

Q-art interview with Bella Kerr & Amanda Roderick. 5 June 2016, Swansea College of Art.

Amanda Roderick is Director of Mission Gallery, a Contemporary Visual Art, Applied Art and Design gallery based on the marina in Swansea. Bella Kerr is Programme Director of the Foundation Art and Design course at Swansea College of Art (about to be the Cert HE: Art and Design Foundation). She is also Chair of the Mission Gallery Board. We interviewed them together at the Dynevor Centre, Swansea. The focus of this interview was on partnerships.

Amanda, can you begin by telling us a bit your background and how you ended up becoming Director at Mission Gallery?

Amanda: Ok yes. I did my foundation in Swansea and I then studied a BA in Art, Design and Theory at the University of East Anglia. I had taken two years out after my Foundation and during that time, became less interested in pursuing a Fine Art practice as an artist, which is what I had originally intended, and instead wanted to focus on a career in a gallery. I moved back to Wales in 1997 after graduating and began as a volunteer at Mission Gallery. I helped to secure more long term funding and have had multiple roles there since, such as Administrator and Development Officer, before becoming its Director five years ago.

And Bella, can you tell us a little bit about your background?

Bella: I did a foundation course at Central School and a BA in fine art at Middlesex. I spent a couple of years making films before doing a filmmaking course at Goldsmiths. I started teaching on the tail of that, initially teaching Photography on the foundation course in Maidstone. I then worked in various art schools – Cardiff, Bristol and at Swansea leading the fine art area of foundation for two years before becoming course leader in 2004. In total I have been teaching for about 25 years. I became Chair of the Mission Gallery Board 2 years ago.

Can you tell us a bit about Mission Gallery and its ethos?

Amanda: Mission Gallery was set up in 1977 by a group of Swansea based artists who had studied outside of Wales and then moved back here and wanted a space to show work. During this time, Swansea was fortunate to have councillors who were very supportive of arts and culture. They gave two buildings to the artists on a peppercorn rent: Mission Gallery was originally a semi-derelict chapel built in 1868 and Swansea Studios, across the road from the gallery, was an old car showroom.

Our current vice-chair Keith Bayliss was one of the original artists and many others are still actively involved as Friends of the Gallery. It was a real labour of love for many of those artists; they renovated it and ran it on a voluntary basis for decades until 2003, and it was open every day without fail. When I started volunteering at Mission it was clear how hard working and committed everyone was, despite not getting paid. We had exhibitions by Gillian Wearing and Catherine Yass and even then we had big ambitions to be outward looking, showing work by artists from outside of Wales, as well as supporting those based in the region. In 2003 the gallery became revenue funded, at last receiving secure funding which meant paid posts and a bigger budget for our programme.

In terms of our ethos, we have always trusted and encouraged artists to use the space in whatever way they want and to push themselves outside of their comfort zones. The gallery is a very powerful, unique space and it works well for site-specific shows. Some artists prefer to use the space in a more commercial way and this works well too; we try to have a few shows like this every couple of years. We have a very broad programme.

The first Director of Mission Gallery, Jane Phillips, was passionate about craft and design and had a really strong vision to introduce this element into the gallery's programme, which has continued. Selling artist's work in this way really turned the gallery around in terms of generating its own income, as well as supporting artists and makers, because we usually buy all work from them outright.

When Jane passed away we set up the Jane Phillips Award to support early career artists with their professional development. Every year the Jane Phillips Award has different awards, residencies and bursaries for artists at various stages of their careers. The Award supports students and graduates at Swansea College of Art as well as those outside of Wales; there is a Travel & Research Bursary; International Residencies; a Curatorial Award and an Exhibition Award & Bursary, usually to support an artist with their first solo exhibiting opportunity. We also offer residencies to students at foundation level and A-level through our *Raising the Bar*¹ education programme, which we run in partnership with Swansea College of Art. This initiative gives the students the opportunity to work alongside professional artists and designers in a series of master-classes in different areas, including Drawing, Fashion & Textiles, Architecture, Glass, Photography, and Curating and Contemporary Arts Practice. We regularly work in partnership with the National Waterfront Museum to show the outcomes of these residencies.

Can you tell us a bit about what the art scene is like in Swansea? We noticed as we walked here from the station that the high street looks a lot different from when we visited here a year ago. It seemed like there were more galleries...and also a cinema front?

Amanda: Yes, there's Cinema & Co, Bloc and Volcano...

Bella: ...there's also Galerie Simpson. Cinema & Co is an independent cinema set up by Theo Tennant, who is in the middle of a degree at Central Saint Martins. I think he came here because he has relatives living locally and has worked out that you can get cheap space here

¹ Raising the Bar <https://raisingthebarmg.wordpress.com/>. Raising the Bar offers students studying at further education a chance to gain a wider experience of the visual and applied arts. Alongside their current BTEC, A or A/S Level studies, they are able to take part in several masterclasses held at Swansea College of Art, UWTSO. This partnership has provided specialist equipment and expertise, enabling Mission Gallery with the Artists, to devise and deliver workshops to a high standard. The students are given the opportunity to work alongside professional artists and designers in a series of masterclasses in different areas. This allowed pupils to learn new techniques, whilst nurturing talent and encouraging their enthusiasm for a career in the arts, becoming our artists or designers of the future. The outcomes of each workshop in Drawing, Fashion & Textiles, Architecture, Glass, Photography, Curating and Contemporary Arts Practice, are all brought together in this end of project exhibition, showcasing the journey and creative development of these young people.

to do something like this. Elysium was also on the High Street at one stage but has since moved to various other places in the city.

What is Elysium?

Amanda: Elysium is an artist led, self-sustaining enterprise comprising of affordable artist workspaces and a contemporary art gallery. It has spaces in four locations across Swansea City Centre. They currently look after over 100 artists and have additional project and resource spaces, including workspaces for Swansea College of Art MA students. Mission Gallery's Jane Phillips Award Residency space is also based there and is made possible because of this partnership. Jonathan Powell, the director of Elysium, has been brilliant at instigating a lot of the activity in the High Street. He is very good at connecting up with people and organisations, and we collaborate on projects together a lot.

Bella: High Street was an area of despair just two or three years ago and people were asking serious questions about what was going on, because it is the first thing you see when you get off the train. I think they have already quite successfully reinvented it.

Amanda: It definitely feels like it is changing for the better. The art college was out of town and isolated but it moved and is now more connected with the City. It's improving all the time. We have also all got quite long-term plans to work with each other. This interconnectedness between art organisations helps the whole city

Is working together important?

Amanda: It is important and really positive but only if the collaborations are authentic and meaningful and bring benefit in some way. We recently had an artist from Brooklyn come to Mission Gallery on a month long residency. She noticed straight away how everyone connects up naturally as part of an evolving creative process, providing genuine support for one another. She said the whole City felt like an art school or a college campus because of the way you can walk around it comfortably, accessing all the galleries, museums, the art college, and it is easy to meet people here.

But I also feel that sometimes we have to do it just to survive and these partnerships take time to nurture, with lots of conversations, often over years. We invest a great deal of staff time for what may be an 'in kind' contribution, which smaller organisations are desperate for nonetheless. We work hard to achieve these sorts of partnerships and our strength in this area is commented upon favourably, but our capacity is often stretched.

Why do you say that?

Bella: Well, funding is being cut to local authorities and Swansea is looking at 50% budget cuts. At the same time Arts Council Wales have had a 4.7% cut. They haven't handed that on to revenue funded places like Mission Gallery this year, but in the coming years that may bite. We have also got the elections coming up in Wales in May and then the EU Referendum. Swansea gets a lot of European money; it always has done. We are on a tipping point, but no one knows which way it is going to tip except probably towards less money overall - but it might not be as simple as that. It might not be an overall cut, it might be that some things are preserved and other things are not supported in the future. There are all sorts of possibilities emerging at this moment and all sorts of concerns about what may happen over the next two or three years.

The City art gallery, the Glynn Vivian is just about to reopen its doors after an £8.5m redevelopment. There's a possibility that they could be turned into a trust or have funding removed by the local authority who currently run the gallery, or by the Arts Council. They have to renegotiate their relationship with everybody and then that has a knock-on effect for Mission. It is a web of interconnectedness.

Amanda: It is very much a changing landscape. Mission are going through a capital redevelopment² as well, where we will be looking to move offsite and work in various locations around the city. Although this is a practical issue and something that we will have to do because of our redevelopment, it is also an important part of our creative strategy, how we like to work and collaborate.

Bella: As chair of Mission Gallery I have been involved in negotiations with the Arts Council about how this redevelopment is funded.

Amanda: We have had to examine how we work, and almost take the organisation apart to see how we can do things differently and become more sustainable. This was initially because of the development and it's the kind of scrutiny you would expect when a project of that magnitude begins. It has had many benefits outside of that project that have been useful and will help us in the future in terms of how we engage with our audiences. We need to think of clever ways to merge commercial ideas with how we are still publically funded, but to support artists. That could be through selling their work and other things that might generate income.

Bella: One of the big things that has emerged in this process is the strength of Mission Gallery's education programme, which is supplementing education right the way through from primary to secondary level. It is also supporting a lot of education at Foundation and HE level and is possibly about to pick up on the hole that has emerged in adult education since the funding cuts, perhaps stepping in to offer mature students the opportunity to go to something like a life drawing class.

What are some of the opportunities of working together in this climate?

Bella: A lot of people in a lot of cities are saying that the universities are the richest institutions. It is the one place that has secure funding as long as it is recruiting. Our University has set up a memorandum of understanding with Mission Gallery and many other cultural providers in the city, whereby even if money isn't changing hands there is an understanding that there will be a sharing of resources and assistance in kind.

I think the University has to understand how much they need the cultural providers; that it can't be an ivory tower, that it has to be permeable, and that you can't run art and design

² In 2013, Mission Gallery began a Feasibility Study for a major capital re-development of the whole building, allowing it to expand and grow. It is a £1.3 million project largely funded by Arts Council Wales. Mission Gallery is proud to have reached a point where to develop our ambitions even further, we are looking at such significant and confident investment. We are excited by the challenges this has brought where we are able to rethink how we can use the building in the best possible way. Addressing accessibility is a key priority for Mission Gallery as is to improve facilities for our artists and our audiences. A key target being to engage more groups with the work we do and attract more visitors to the gallery. All of these inform Mission Gallery's next phase of development

courses unless there is a gallery on your doorstep to visit. And there can't just be one gallery, there has to be two, three or four galleries, otherwise there is no critical mass of making. The Arts Council are probably also expecting quite a lot from the University. We are now in that dialogue, trying to understand how the future might shape up in terms of use of sharing space, resources, money, and personnel.

For example, the education programme Criw Celf West³ is a big project that Mission Gallery is running over two years, that is teaching at all levels throughout primary and secondary. To deliver something like this it is far better to negotiate and use the facilities in the University than to have to invest in facilities in the gallery. Especially with something like buying computers and software that will go out of date. The University is constantly updating and at present has the funds to do it. It also has a lot of downtime in the evenings and on Saturdays and Sundays. There are mutual needs. For the University, they have got to see the recruitment possibilities of opening up their doors to people who are attending at all levels of school education. It answers the problem of money getting thinner and thinner on the ground.

Is this relationship with the University a new thing or is it something that has always existed in some form?

Amanda: I think we have had a relationship with the university over the last 15 or 20 years and that has come about through our volunteer programme and through the fact that a lot of our exhibiting artists have been lecturers. I think nearly every visual art and craft lecturer at the University has had an exhibition in some form at Mission Gallery. We also provide a facility for professional practice for students, as staff bring their students down for talks with big name artists. A lot of the staff here are Bella's ex-students from Foundation who have come back to Swansea looking for jobs in the arts and we have provided that sort of employment. Others are volunteering whilst doing their degrees or their foundation courses.

But I think the relationship has to become more business-like and not so one-sided. I think we have to be a bit canny about it, so that we are not just an annex of the university. I think that is beginning to be understood a lot more.

Bella: I think volunteering is good because it cuts both ways. The gallery receives the benefit of the volunteer and the volunteer receives the benefit of learning about the business. But it has been an immense gift to the university to have that free piece of learning. I think the exchange is more than fair in terms of the gallery's contribution, and I think this does need to be redressed.

Universities will complain about lack of money, but I am sitting here looking at a great big photocopier and they are all over the building. I can take my card out of my pocket and I can use it as much as I like and that is worth many pounds. There is also heat and light and all of the things that we have in excess in this room. If we were doing this interview down at Mission we would be sharing the space with a co-worker, it would be a lot colder and there would be a very small printer.

³ <http://www.arts.wales/arts-in-wales/inspire/reach/cryw-celf>

Amanda: When we do eventually go off-site, which could be another two years away, there is the offer of administrative and project space through Swansea College of Art, which will be brilliant. Mission will never be a 'big' space and I think it has been understood that we can work together on joint marketing initiatives, city-wide exhibitions and projects so our presence is felt across the city, outside of the gallery walls. We have never wanted to be physically bound by the building, so this fits perfectly with our strong outreach programme and shared philosophy of collaboration.

Bella: I think that it will be hugely beneficial for the university to have professional gallery activities in the spaces of the university.

Bella, I wondered if you could tell us a bit about the foundation course, in terms of who comes and what it is preparing people for?

Bella: We get a real cross section of local school leavers, and an increasing number of students of all ages and levels of qualification attending Foundation now. Increasingly there isn't a standard student. I think word has gone out that it is a place to re-evaluate and reinvent yourself.

In its simplest form, it is about getting students ready to progress onto BA courses and building the person for a point beyond their education. That may come sooner for a lot of them because, if they are already graduates they may not be going onto any other education, so they are going out into the world again. Or they may be leaping over BA and going directly onto an MA.

We are increasingly having to anticipate their lives. When I was a student that expanse of the BA stretched out as this luxurious place and I had all the time in the world. I think my students now see the world pressing up against the end of the course and, with that, the need to earn money. I was funded for most of my education and then went out into a world where I could get housing and other benefits. I always worked, but there was a safety net if you had a period when you were in transition from one thing to another.

Amanda: That's also how I was able to volunteer for six years. I did some work obviously, but I was able to completely commit to Mission Gallery as we had the safety net of housing benefit and graduates haven't got that now. We do notice a difference in how much people can commit because they are more afraid of how they are going to live. If they can get paid work for that afternoon they are not going to come and work for free. It was a very different way of thinking back then.

Bella: I think the shame of that is that they now need the volunteering more than ever to succeed in the field they have chosen. This morning in the foundation studios we had a couple of great talks by two young women in their twenties about their progress through volunteering, internships and working in Venice as invigilators and how it got them to the point where they are now. They needed a certain amount of support and freedom to be able to get to that point. It is a puzzle that, increasingly, my students are trying to work out: how can they go into the world?

What is Swansea like as a place for those starting out in the arts?

Amanda: It's good in the sense of lots of affordable studio space, but there should be more spaces and opportunity for them – and despite the efforts of Mission and Elysium, this is still

the case. Following graduation, there are funding opportunities for early career artists, which helps them a lot. Many of the young artists we have shown have received Production or Research and Development Grants. As Mission Gallery and many other galleries in Wales have small programming budgets these grants offer substantial support for an artist project. I don't know if that happens in England?

Bella, would you say that preparation for life after the course comes as much through the pedagogy of the foundation course or is it equally as important to structure these additional talks like those you had this morning? Are there any more examples of the latter that you run?

Bella: I think what we did today is an interesting example in that, while it is extra to the course in one way, it also embedded, not only in the timetable but also physically. We have this idea that the space is our tool and that when we bring things into the space they become part of the course. Traditionally, contextual studies is taught in a lecture theatre. You all get up, leave the studio and you go to the lecture theatre, you sit in the dark, someone shows some slides. We stopped doing that because it was hard to book a lecture theatre to fit the timetable. We started to set up a projector in the studio space and moved our chairs and did talks on the spot. The same with life drawing. These days we do it in the studio and it really works because the course is happening in the space around the class.

So this morning we visited the Elysium studio space and Mission Gallery having started the day by picking up our chairs and setting up a projector in the foundation studios, so that the two visiting artists could talk about their work. The artists who were speaking today talked about letting their practice evolve from making through to arts administration, curatorial roles, internships and invigilation. This is a really useful message. Considering your future is something you should do as part of your learning and your practice.

In terms of our pedagogy and the projects we introduce, I usually set a site-specific project. When you look at site you have to look at location, you have to look at audience, you have to look at the public and private nature of your practice. This year, as the introduction to fine art, I set an art and politics project for which the students had to write a manifesto. I read them the Oldenburg manifesto 'I Am for an Art', which is wonderful. We asked students to write a six-point manifesto and to address any issues that interested them. They were encouraged to think about who they might be in the future, what kind of artist they might want to be, what kind of art they might want to make and what they might want of their relationship with the world. Instead of just saying, "I am here learning, I am an empty vessel, I am in education", we are immediately asking them to think beyond that, and project not only into the future, but out into the world. If they want to talk about current political, social and other issues the manifesto, and the piece of work they make from it, is a place to present those thoughts.

Within the fine art pathway of the foundation course is your goal to prepare people to be artists?

Bella: I think for people who want to be artists we are preparing them adequately to consider the possibility. We are also talking to them about being all sorts of other things. We are very clearly saying, "Look there are people who run galleries, there are people who are arts administrators, there are people who write, there are people who work in all sorts of places in the creative industries or cultural industries or whatever you want to call them." I

think fine art is potentially a basis for many of those careers. A small percentage of people will be practitioners and a huge number will be working creatively and in all sorts of ways, in a far broader set of contexts.

I would say that in the last five years this is a message we have increasingly received from the students and we have put out to them more strongly. It has come from both sides.

Do you hope that your students will stay here once they have finished and contribute to the art scene in Swansea?

Bella: I hope they do the thing that is right for them. Swansea is quite a small city and the great things about a small city are all the things we have talked about. The bad thing is that if you grow up here you have to go somewhere else to experience all the other things in life. You either travel or you go and study somewhere else. For some people it is absolutely essential that they go somewhere else. That might be somewhere else that is quite like Swansea or it might be a bigger city. I would hope some of those people never come back, not because I don't think they should be here,, but because I hope that they find what they need elsewhere. There will always be people who do come back. Welsh culture has a strong sense of home, place and family, and people want to come back to that. I have been teaching here for long enough to see people who had gone away, come back again and become very active here. For me it is very exciting to see that success and to be able to reintroduce them to the course as people who have made that journey.

We have had people who stayed for BA but went away for MA. Ryan L. Moule and Alex Duncan both did Foundation and both stayed here to do their BAs. Both then went on to do MAs at the Royal College of Art. Ryan came back and is now teaching here and has shown at Mission Gallery, but is still very connected to elsewhere. Alex is suddenly everywhere. The staying was very important for Alex, as his work was very rooted in this place and the sea; he literally works with stuff that is shaped by the sea. Alex was himself shaped by being here and he needed to be here for long enough to mature as an artist in order to take that elsewhere and then let it grow. I think that worked well for him. Again that has been quite symbiotic with the cultural scene here. He shown at Mission Gallery after graduating and then won the Wakelin Prize, which is run by the Glynn Vivian. He is also doing plenty of other things in London and elsewhere.

In England there have been cuts to the arts in schools. We got the impression from the conference that it was quite the opposite here, is that true?

Amanda: I think it probably is the case that it is a bit healthier here but obviously we are still facing a lot of heavy cuts. The former chair of the Arts Council of Wales, Dai Smith wrote a document about education and cultural life in Wales. The Welsh Government accepted it and now fund the arts quite heavily through schools and galleries. The Criw Celf West project that we facilitate is where we receive most of our education funding. So now what happens is, instead of the local authorities running many of these education projects, the money is given to venues and galleries like Mission. This is potentially very positive for Wales.