

020 Wysing 30th Anniversary Podcast: Donna Podcast Transcript

Harold Offeh: I'm Harold Offeh and I'm here with Wysing Arts Director Donna Lynas and I've been having these series of conversations with various people connected with Wysing's history. We're continuing to mark the 30th anniversary of Wysing Arts Centre. So, hello Donna.

Donna Lynas: Hello Harold. *laughs*

HO: *laughs* Thank you for agreeing to take time to have this little in conversation. I'm sort of structuring the conversation around three questions, talking points, so we'll just kind of go through those. So just to leap into it, the first question, could you describe or discuss your first experience of spending a night at Wysing. I presume in the farmhouse, but it might not be.

DL: Yes, it was. It was my first day in the job of being Director at Wysing. For the first four months actually I was living on site. I was commuting up on a Monday, staying until Thursday evening and then going home for a long weekend and then coming back again because I had been living elsewhere and I was relocating. So, my first day in the job I spent the night at Wysing and was in the little room at the top of the stairs, Room 2. It used to be called Room 3 actually but it's Room 2 now. And yeah, I remember I was the only person in the farmhouse that night and I'm quite easily spooked by things like that but I felt very very comfortable and happy to be in the house, even though I was on my own, you know, in the dark in the countryside which is not what I'm used to, or wasn't at the time. So yeah. I spent an evening on my own there and I remember waking up the next morning and just being so... I guess kind of moved in a way by drawing back the curtains and seeing the garden. It was April, April 5th was actually the first day, the first night.

HO: You remember the day?

DL: Yeah.

HO: Wow, that great!

DL: Yeah, and then just sort of opening and looking out into the garden and thinking wow, what a beautiful place to wake up in and it was such a nice atmosphere. The birds were singing. It was my first day, well second day at that stage in the job, and I was full of optimism and somehow, yeah, joining at that time of year as well, in the Spring, all just felt really joyous in a way. So that was my first experience.

HO: So, you're coming up to an anniversary yourself then, aren't you? It was 2005, April, so 15 years.

DL: Yeah it is 15 years next month actually. Yes, I did not expect to stay for 15 years but here I am.

- HO: What were your...did you have expectations, you know, when you were appointed or...I mean I'm sure part of the interview process was obviously sort of coming but I also wonder how that experience of staying here shifted or if it did shift your sense of what Wysing is as a place?
- DL: Yeah definitely, I think being able to live onsite for the first 4 months was really good because it meant that I could see and experience the place at different times of the day and night and basically have the experience of what an artist who would be coming to be in residence would be and what you know the ebbs and flow of the people onsite and offsite and what it was like to be there on your own , you know, at midnight with no one else around. Yeah, it was...it definitely...I suppose it just made me realise that that's what set Wysing apart from other places. The fact that there was this house. And that's...you know...and actually the four months I was there, there was a lot of toing and froing. lots of artists coming, so people who were doing residencies. A family moved in, for a short period of time, into one of the rooms and the atmosphere changed when they came in and I could really see how different kinds of people being in that space also changed the dynamics of being resident at Wysing, so yeah, I guess, I hadn't...maybe I had...because I'd come from another gallery, I'd been thinking...well I'd been working in galleries for a long time and I had wanted to move out to Wysing to try out a different kind of model and to think about, you know, research and production and for that to be the focus. So yeah, maybe when I first started, I was still in gallery mode, you know, in a way and having that experience of being in a much more domestic space straight away probably was quite formative actually to what lead, in terms of how we began structuring residencies and thinking about people coming together in that space.
- HO: And I guess, yeah, that journey over kind of 15 years as well in terms of what you found here when you arrived. I mean obviously the thing about Wysing is it's still evolving, but could you speak to that a little bit? That's quite a big broad question but...
- DL: Yeah.
- HO: Sorry that's not very helpful!
- DL: Yeah. I mean it felt....it was very different. Obviously, we hadn't done any of the... we've done a number of capital projects now and the site has been landscaped and there's a different feel to it, I guess. I mean, I suppose it felt maybe a lot more functional when I arrived. There was a lot of the older farm buildings. There were some really large barns at the front of the site. So, you could really feel the fact that it was a farm before actually. When I first came here, there was a lot of...well I guess just the buildings felt a lot more farm-like and much more functional I guess in terms of what their use was so I suppose over the time a lot of it has been about how we sort of move it more into being an Arts Centre. That's one of the things I was quite keen....because I remember even when I was doing things like interviews for local radio and things in my early days and people would always ask about the farm and I

would say but it's not a farm anymore now, it's an arts centre. Somehow we needed to decide what this place was and really think what it is and what it's trying to do and then the buildings then also started to adapt to that. So now to be it really feels like it really is an arts centre and you know it's got a lot of the physical infrastructure to make it possible to make work here as an artist. Perhaps in the early days it felt a bit more ad-hoc in terms of how the buildings had been adapted.

HO: Yeah no one talks about it as a farm now do they.

DL: No, not anymore. No but it was quite strange at the beginning. Even this one interviewer I remember in particular kept saying to me, 'So you don't have any animals anymore?', I was like, 'No because it's an Arts Centre!' I suppose in terms of this whole road, Fox Road, where we're on, all of these houses were farms at one stage, so this part of South Cambridgeshire would have been all farms. So, in a way, yeah, that all changed in the 80s and I guess just sort of leaving that behind. Like our next-door neighbour runs a business there now and that would've been one of the older farms as well. I guess it's just time have moved on, things have changed in the local area as well. But yeah...

HO: But that partly segways into the next question, which is about, how would you describe Wysing to someone who's never been here? For me this is often a tricky thing in terms of trying to kind of encapsulate what happens here. I mean you've got a professional relationship really with this question really.

DL: Yeah.

HO: But I'm still curious to know your answer.

DL: I just think about it all the time, I mean...I don't even know if the right words exist, because we use words like campus, and I guess that's the closest anyone has got to it but it still doesn't feel like the right word, or you know like a workplace or something as well but then you know I've been thinking about this word work quite a lot actually, especially in relation to labour and Helen Cammock's film about the pressures of work, so I don't always feel comfortable about talking about it in that way either, where probably I used to be. But, trying to put it in a nutshell it's basically a place where artists come to ultimately make the work that they want to make, and we will, the institution, tries to be a facilitator for those artists and their ideas and I guess it is a workplace because people are coming to work in the studios to work on the art that they're creating and we're all here working as well to create programmes or the other way of framing it potentially or that we have framed it as a research centre for the arts and artists. Where artists can come and undertake the research that they're focused on. Often in relationship with us. We put out these open calls occasionally where we say this is an area of research that we're looking at, who wants to come and also work on that research here with us? So yeah, this whole thing about research and work, the campus, all of that hopefully creates a sort of series of words that sound quite dynamic. It's not a passive space, it's a kind of active space. We also ask that of audiences when they come, often they're coming

to do something. It's not a leisure type experience. So yeah... I don't know if that was all a bit too rambling. If I should be a bit more...I suppose the reason it's a bit...I find it complex and it's not something that is easy to articulate.

HO: Yeah, I mean I think a lot of institutions are based around outputs aren't they, you know, sort of these fixed points or defined whereas I think Wysing is so much, like you've said, about sort of process and research, the development of ideas. But also...we've been talking a little bit about it but community and the kind of sort of social aspects of hosting and initiating conversations. All of those things are sort of less tangible, and they manifest themselves in so many different ways, but yeah, there's something very vital about that. I feel...I was interested in your kind of ambivalence around the word work, because I think that's...maybe more to do with the way that...this does speak to Helen's film, Helen Cammock's film, but when you have agency with work so like, you know, there are so many forms of sort of labour where people feel disempowered and I think that's what special about Wysing here. It gives agency to peoples' work because there's time and space and speculation and wonder, which maybe sounds like...but like for me one of the difficult things I think when I got the residency here was just dealing with the fact that I just had time to do stuff. I was like, Oh! And not having demands really made.

DL: Yeah that's what I mean about work. So then if you call it a workplace, suddenly that sets up an expectation that you're going to come and you're going to be in the studio producing and that's not you know...that works for some people, that's what they want, want to produce because they've carved out some time to be here to focus on that, but other people just want some time just to get away from all that and to just think and to connect with peers and to talk about ideas, talk about directions or problems or, you know, and to use it as a speculative space. I mean I do talk a lot about Wysing as a place of potential. I feel like there's a lot of potential all the time. There's a sense of potentiality, I don't know if that makes sense? Where things could go in any direction and we're always kind of waiting just be told by the artist who's working here where they want to take things and then we'll help them take them there. So, it's kind of...yeah...it's a kind of...a sort of space of waiting then acting on things very fast. But some people don't want to do that. They want to just be here and not and feel like there's got to be something that has to come at the end of it and you know it's not like we're all sitting around waiting for someone to tell us what they want, it's more about then structuring it so they're able then to come forward and say well actually, I do want to develop this into something else. I want to work with a partner. Or can you facilitate this, or I need more money, you so...yeah so, it's a speculative kind of space.

HO: You also...I think also what people might also sort of miss if the way you frame and shape conversations here. It's not completely like a sort of like an open house flat structure, there is a sense in which there is kind of direction which I think also helps. I think that's oh so easy to get lost in the way that...so for example you use the idea of the polyphonic and now we're moving into this broadcast. Instead of being restrictive, I think they're quite generative sort of models. I don't know if it's really a

question. It's more of a comment. I'm just kind of interested in that approach that Wysing takes.

DL: I think at the beginning, when I first started being involved in residencies here, they were much more open and it felt, well, what is the role of these residencies and is that the right way of doing it? You know, and then they became incredibly competitive when it was much more open and really difficult to get a residency here at one stage, so, yeah, so the framing started off as a way to kind of focus ideas I guess and then we structure a lot of events and talks to start expanding out some of these kind of words that we would use like polyphonic or even things like we explored the forest in one residency and looked at that from lots of different aspects, through public events but also discussions with the artists who are here, but I guess as times have changed and things have changed and then also realising that the relationships with artists who are coming here isn't just a one way relationship, we are also in fact learning a huge amount from talking to artists and taking back what they're telling us so that we're changing the institution ultimately and then realising well actually we could, if we want to, frame a whole year around something like the polyphonic where we're looking at many voices, and then bringing in many voices, perhaps voices that we hadn't listened to before or heard before. And then how can we build on that into the next year and how, you know, how can we then adapt the institution better to have those voices have more visibility. What needs to change institutionally as well as practically? So that's been very exciting to be part of because actually it is...you know, it feels like Wysing is this place where you can really try to sort of engage in some of the bigger questions that people are struggling with. In terms of more societal questions I guess and also think about what the role of a place like Wysing is now in the arts and how we can actually set ourselves a challenge to be better at things or change or make things easier for artists. So yeah, a lot of the framing is around artistic...ultimately will be artistic outputs but there are also institutional effects to that way of working.

HO: And sort of Wysing does operate now within a constellation of artist institutions in a very particular sort of way. It has a particular place, to use that analogy, in the landscape. I mean has that been a very deliberate strategy for you in terms of differentiating Wysing's role?

DL: Yeah. I mean well, it's partly practical. We're not in a town or a city. We're not even in the middle of Bourn village, we're on the edge. We've got all this land; we've got a number of buildings. I suppose anyone who is running an arts organisation, especially someone that's in receipt of public funding is constantly questioning, 'Are we doing the right thing with this funding? Are we putting it to the best use? Are the right people receiving it?' That's a constant process of self-reflection as an institution so I guess then you think, well actually expand the reach, how can we actually position, not necessarily position, but what is the most useful role of Wysing I guess, that's what we really come down to, for artists for the visual arts more widely. And then around that a number of partnerships have emerged, potentially of like-minded organisations or peers or perhaps bigger networks of different scales of institution that then we can...I guess test things out on behalf of a wider group maybe in a way.

But yeah, I think it's about not necessarily...well I suppose there is a certain amount of deliberate positioning in that, you know, we want to be connected, we don't want to feel just because we are up a B road in the middle of Cambridgeshire that we're somehow disconnected. I think those partnerships and relationships beyond the geographic boundaries are really really important and ones that we pay a lot of attention to as well so that there is a dialogue with a wider peer group.

HO: Absolutely. We've got one last question. This is partly based on the artist Ruth Biel's kind of ongoing project; I think that she set up in the farmhouse which invites artists to leave a book or publication that future residents or visitors can kind of engage with. Over time it's kind of built up this really nice kind of library, resource. I just wanted to ask you Donna, what would you or have you left in the farmhouse as part of that offer?

DL: Well, what have I left? I've left my sofa, that was my sofa. I've left...

HO: Your personal sofa?

DL: Yeah. A lot of the furniture in the farmhouse was mine and the Live/work Studio actually.

HO: Was this from downsizing when you moved? Or were you just...

DL: Or when I got a new a new....

HO: Upsizing! Upscaling sorry! *laughs*

DL: *laughs* Or both. I mean the cot in the big bedroom was my children's cot. The car seats were my children's car seats. There are quite a lot of toys that were my children's toys. I've left domestic things in the farmhouse that probably people don't really know but yeah there's furniture of mine that's in there now. So that's...yeah....

HO: In some ways that's kind of an extension of your hosting.

DL: Yeah maybe.

HO: Yeah that's kind of interesting to sort of know that that's sort of actualised...

DL: Yeah...

HO: ...through the fabric of that domestic space.

DL: I have also left books and I'm trying to remember. I think I might have left two. I definitely left Borges' 'Labyrinths' and I think I might have also left 'The Rings of Saturn' by Sebald. I think that's one of the books I have left. But in terms of what I might leave into the future, I suppose *laughs*...I don't know. I suppose maybe more practical things. I suppose the farmhouse was reshaped quite significantly by

the artist Giles Round, not that long ago, so it feels like such a lovely space in there now. He designed...he helped create a very nice ambiance in terms of commissioning people, like Ruth Biel actually, to make wallpaper and curtains. Giles designed curtains. There's a lot of kind of artworks inserted in that we commissioned that are in the farmhouse now. I think beyond more of those kind of things, maybe more practical things like better sound proofing...

HO: *laughs*

DL: ...less drafty windows.

HO: The creaks are part of the charm, I think. *laughs*

DL: *laughs* Not everyone would say that actually!

HO: *laughs*

DL:: But yeah...

HO: I think it's a very rich space that comes through, I think...Some of those previous commissions by Giles. There's a sense in which it's a very domestic convivial social space but it's also nice to be in conversation with artworks, things have been clearly thought through and considered. I think it's really...from someone who spent some time there...it's you know...

DL: ...yeah it's nice space to be in...

HO:it's a really good balance.

DL: We could do with more of...I guess I suppose I'm just thinking of practical things. You know, accommodation is something that we really struggle here with now because so many people coming it just never feels like there's enough room. Maybe my contribution should be another farmhouse over the road!

HO: Another farmhouse? An extension?

DL Well maybe not another farmhouse but more...well funnily enough we are doing... I think my contribution ultimately has to be making sure that the infrastructure, all the spaces, are fit for purpose. Are the best they can be, are improving, and adapting and changing as people need them too. That's kind of my role here, isn't it, to make sure that things are functioning the best way that they possibly can for the people who are using them and to create as nice an experience as possible for people that are coming.

HO: Roll on! Thank you. Thanks Donna.

DL: *laughs* Thank you!

HO: Thanks for giving us the time.