

## **Natasha Ruwona, Syllabus Coordinator at Wysing Arts Centre**

Hello, I'm Natasha Ruwona and I'm the Syllabus Coordinator. Before we get started, I'm going to provide a short self-description for access purposes. I'm a mixed-race black woman in my mid 20s, I'm sitting against a white background and I'm wearing glasses and a blue velvet jumper.

So, Syllabus is a collaboratively-produced alternative learning programme in its seventh year, that will support ten artists across ten months. Syllabus offers time to come together with artists from across the UK to discuss ideas, work, life and approaches to practice. I'm joined by the new partners for the programme, PS Squared, New Art Exchange and TACO!, who alongside long-standing partners Wysing Arts Centre, Spike Island, Studio Voltaire and Eastside Projects, will host gatherings for the Syllabus artists. We're going to learn more about each organisation and the context that they're working in, and also their interest in being part of the Syllabus programme as a partner.

## **Ciara Hickey, Artist Development Curator at PS Squared**

My name is Ciara Hickey, and I'm Artist Development Curator at PS Squared in Belfast, my pronouns are she/her, and I work with Jane Morrow and Davy Mahon, who are our Co-Directors. PS Squared began and continues to be a space where artists are supported to make art and are encouraged to play and experiment in the process. PS Squared has been a vital part of the arts ecology in Belfast since 1994. First with artist-run studio spaces, Paragon Studios and in 2004, it expanded through an additional project space, which we continue to run, so that's PS Squared.

One of the characteristics of PS Squared is our responsiveness to the changing nature of the city and a real openness and generosity, I would say, to the ideas of the artists and communities who inhabit the city. And over the past few years, we have moved around quite a lot, in and out of buildings within the cathedral quarter in the city that have been vacated due to a city centre regeneration scheme. And what's exciting for me, anyway, is the kind of-- with each move, the possibilities of the site have been embraced and kind of responded to, by the artists that we work with.

So we are-- while I would say many of the grassroots arts initiatives that were set up around the same time as PS Squared back in the 90s, they've over time developed into kind of more formal, professionalised galleries, PS Squared very much has retained this kind of-- the ethos and the energy of an artist-led, DIY project. It's a very experimental and inclusive approach and, in my opinion anyway, it's led to some of the most memorable artistic moments in Belfast over the last 20 years.

So, Belfast's art scene is defined by a very strong artist-led grassroots ethic. As I said there are many of the leading art galleries such as the MAC, Golden Thread Gallery, Belfast Exposed, PS Squared, Catalyst and some of the long term studios like Flax, Queen Street Studios, PS Squared - they were all started up in the 90s, in and around the time of the ceasefire, and set up pretty much in the middle of a cultural vacuum in the city.

As I said, these artists led-initiatives slowly evolved into their more kind of professionalised states that we have now. However, this grassroots DIY energy, I would say, absolutely is like characteristic of the art scene here in Belfast, there's a lot of energy, there's a lot of generosity, there's a lot of sharing of resources and people and in the sector.

And the other thing about the art scene in Belfast and in Northern Ireland, I would say, is that we're in a quite unique position, because we're really well connected to what's happening in the rest of the UK. But we also have the south of Ireland on our doorstep, and we are very well connected to those spaces and those projects, and there's a lot of kind of cross-border activity happening at the moment. So we're really excited to share that with people and to kind of open that up, I feel that Northern Ireland is a place people don't necessarily always think about coming to and especially don't always maybe know about what's happening in the art scene here. We don't have a very kind of great-- we don't have really any commercial sector, so it's all kind of what's happening on the ground in the studios with the people who are here and kind of give to the scene, it's very kind of-- it's a space people give a lot to, and kind of commit to, I would say.

### **Mat Jenner, Artist Curator at TACO!**

Hi, my name's Mat Jenner. I'm an Artist Curator at TACO! We're an artist-led space in Thamesmead, south of London. My pronouns are he/him. TACO is an artist-led organisation for research, production and exchange. We are engaged with our local context and centre artists practices in the way we work and grow, so that means we're always thinking about 'What does it mean to be artist-led?' We support a dialogue between artists, audiences, community and place, so we're thinking about 'What does it mean to be an artist in the place that we're in and what does it mean to make art here?'

So, we consider TACO to be an evolving, collaborative conversation, thinking about what art is and what it can do. So we've got-- TACO comprises of a production space, like a studio space, and also a public venue that has a gallery, an event space, bookshop and café and a

broadcast studio. Publishing and distribution is a big part of our work as is commissioning and projects. These spaces support a programme that includes artist research, exhibitions, live broadcast, talks and workshops, music performances, community production, artist publishing, and co-authored projects of local people and groups. We work with artists at different stages in their career to realise ambitious work that they would not otherwise have the opportunity to make.

Invited artists are supported to research develop projects over a dedicated period of time, this research informs the public programme and how we develop as an organisation. Projects initiated by artists vary in duration, often across multiple years, we set an open timeframe, with no set expectations and outcomes and aim to be led by artistic inquiry.

TACO context is—it's a London context, and it's a context of regeneration and change, in that TACO is situated in a place that's undergoing extensive regeneration, on London's edge. We are very aware and sensitive to the communities in which, not only do we work with, but which we're a part of, and a lot of our work considers the intersection with what we do with that context. There is an artist community that has grown up in Thamesmead principally because it's been pushed there, through the expensive nature of living and working in London as an artist, and so Thamesmead has, as a regeneration context, artists have been a part of that conversation and are used in essence, as part of the cultural change that-- and built into that kind of planning around regeneration. So that's a really unique and sensitive context that TACO is working in and thinking about, 'What is our role in that, how are we complicit in gentrification, how are we complicit in some of the inequalities that happen through the regeneration process?'

Being in London, we're also part of a wider artistic community that has strong connections to the art market that has strong connections with wider-- and other institutions and organisations that work in the capital and there's an ebb-and-flow and a connection and an exchange across all of that, with TACO's work.

### **Michael Radford, Head of Neighbourhoods at New Art Exchange**

I'm Michael Radford, I'm Head of Neighbourhoods at New Art Exchange in Hyson Green, Nottingham, my pronouns are he/him. So, New Art Exchange is an award-winning creative space in the heart of Hyson Green in Nottingham. We are the largest gallery in the UK dedicated to contemporary visual arts from and platforming the global ethnic majority. We are reshaping kind of, the narrative of contemporary art and we're grounded in the, kind of, commitment to celebrating diversity, fostering inclusivity and providing a platform for voices that have historically been underrepresented in the art world. The way we're doing this is through exhibitions, live performance, artist development programmes, supporting, kind of, global ethnic majority leadership and governance within the arts, and extensive community-based and citizen-led work.

Currently, over the past, kind of, year, we've been going through a change in how we work to become much more of a citizen-led organisation, which means that from our exhibitions, through to programming and commissions that we put out, citizen panels and community consultation has been at the heart of everything that we do. So that's been a real big shift in how I think we work, and how a lot of organisations in the UK work.

In terms of Nottingham, Nottingham has a really rich art scene, lots of great visual arts venues, such as Backlit Gallery, Nottingham Contemporary, Primary, as well as a really great theatre scene and live music scene. So it's quite a rich art scene. There's lots of independent arts spaces and companies who are, like, new and emerging, producing some really great work around the city. So that's also really exciting.

So, Nottingham has got a great art scene and there are lots of great people making brilliant work here. We wanted to, kind of, be involved, so that we could support artist development and contribute to those conversations and initiatives around artist development and shaping the cultural landscape. And we're really, really keen for Nottingham and Nottingham artists to be represented in Syllabus, so that we can also connect with this wider network of partners and artists, but also Nottingham-based artists get access to this wider network of practitioners and yeah, and organisations which they can-- they can work with. I think we are just really excited to be a part of that wider network for organisations and to be able to connect with different artists, and look at how we platform those different artists and contribute to their development, so yeah, it's really exciting.

### **Matt Jenner, Artist Curator at TACO!**

TACO is really dependent on its relationship with artists and communities for its legitimacy. And, these relationships are generated through, sort of questions that we have about 'What does an artist-led organisation look like?' 'How might we use art to create community?' 'How is artistic value constituted?' 'Where is cultural capital situated?' 'What can and should art do, and who for?' 'And what does it mean to make art here?' And 'How can we sustain a practice as artists?' And 'What constitutes a public, and how do we work with that?' And

through Syllabus, we want to explore those questions with other artists and to develop activity that orbits around those questions, and to collectively imagine what TACO is and who it's for, and how we might do things, and how we might aim to nurture porosity and collaboration, at the centre of that conversation.

We see Syllabus as an opportunity to shape our thinking and explore these questions, with artists from very different geographies and perspectives and inquiries. We'd really like to foster long-term conversations that can speak to our context, but also the concern of artists that are on Syllabus. So we-- we envisaged that exchange as making a really exciting contribution to our public personal reach.

### **Ciara Hickey, Artist Development Curator at PS Squared**

PS Squared for the past five years has run-- has been one of the partners in the Freelands Artists Programme and it has been an incredible experience, and I've seen first-hand the impact that artist development programmes can have on people's careers. Syllabus is a very different premise, it's a very different structure to the Freelands Artists Programme, but it's something that I feel is massively needed, and it's-- I find it just really exciting to see kind of, what it's done in the past.

I would say as well, that we applied because we're very interested in artist development as a whole and we're really committed to that within our organisation. I am really excited about the new network that we will have of these brilliant artists across the UK and I'm super excited about being there at the beginning of the start of amazing conversations and collaborations and future plans that I hope will come from Syllabus.

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As a reminder for anyone listening, the applications for Syllabus are now open and close on March 18th. Thank you for listening!