

[00:00:36] **KL:** You're listening to *This Thing We Call Art*, a podcast about how, "We are in a society that is inherently kind of, um, built to not listen to art. To voices like ours." I'm your host, Kelly Lloyd, a visual artist, essayist, and educator currently based in the U.K. I've been interviewing people in the arts about their livelihoods since 2017, and today you're going to hear a conversation I had on 2 December 2022 with Ruth Lie.

Ruth Lie is a curator / producer based in South East London and is currently Senior Creative Producer at Somerset House Studios. A former mentor on the London Creative Network (L.C.N.) programme with SPACE Studios, she has specific experience in public sector, events based programming, as well as commissioning and supporting both new and established artists from a wide range of creative disciplines. As a result, she has formed long lasting active networks within the arts and culture landscape of London over the past twelve years. Through programming large scale events, festivals and site specific projects, she is passionate about projects and work that explore different perspectives within art institutions and wants the language of the art world to be more open and accessible. Originating from an architecture background, Ruth has a Masters in Curating Contemporary Art from the Royal College of Art (R.C.A.). She worked for a number of years at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), which included leading on the Friday Late programme there. After going freelance and having two children, she worked on projects for organisations such as the Wellcome Collection, Museum of London, Culture Mile, City of London and NOW Gallery. She ran the East London Comics & Arts Festival (E.L.C.A.F.), funded by Arts Council England for 6 years, before moving from freelance life to Whitechapel Gallery where she was Curator of Public Programmes (maternity cover) and led on the

Nocturnal Creatures festival in 2022.

I met Ruth in 2021 when we both started working as mentors in SPACE Studios' London Creative Network Programme. I spoke with them at the café at Tate Britain. The audio quality for this season is varied, so remember that the transcripts for all these conversations are available on the project's website [thisthingwecallart.com](http://thisthingwecallart.com).

Our conversation was an hour and 15 minutes-long, and while I wish I could share it with you in its entirety, today, you'll listen to excerpts from it. I'm going to drop you in at the beginning ...

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[00:02:57] **KL:** So, you asked me why I want to interview you.

[00:03:00] **RL:** Yeah. Why, seriously, why do you want to interview me?

[00:03:02] **KL:** Why are you asking me why I wanna interview you?

[00:03:07] **RL:** Because I guess like, I, I think I prefer to be behind the scenes. I think the thought of kind of giving a talk or, um, talking about my own like practice, um, is a total like reversal. And I think actually the, one of the biggest roles, parts of my role is giving other people a voice. Like, I don't particularly think my story is that interesting, but there we go. Like, that's just... [LAUGHS]

[00:03:42] **KL:** Why is it important for you to give other people a voice?

[00:03:47] **RL:** Because we, we are in a society that is inherently kind of, um, built to not listen to art. To voices like ours. So, I guess that's always been an interest of mine to pick up on those that might not necessarily be, um, the assumed fit for the art world that maybe sit on the periphery of what it means to be - to work within art and be - and be part of that world.

So, I guess, um, that has always been my interest and I think that's kind of lent itself to a lot of the things that I've done. So, yeah.

[00:04:33] **KL:** And you said before we were recording that you don't like doing interviews.

[00:04:37] **RL:** I guess it's not that I don't like them, but I feel probably more like naturally uncomfortable being like having to kind of, I will do them if I have to, like, give a talk or have any kind of public presence, I guess. Um, and maybe that goes back to that whole question of like curator versus producer, um, and how those things are defined. And as a curator, you're kind of expected to have, um, be able to coherently, like, express your opinions. [LAUGHS] I guess that's why.

[00:05:11] **KL:** Maybe let's start with curator versus producer.

[00:05:15] **RL:** Mm-hmm... Well, I guess it's, um, because I studied curating, that's my background. I originally wasn't, um, was from a design background, was in architecture. And so, I had this kind of formal curatorial education during my Master's. Um, but what that teaches you is all the kind of conceptual notions of like, being in the art world; how you think about curatorial thinking versus like art, artistic practice and so on. And like actually the reality when you, when you enter, like, the working field is just a totally different thing, right? Like, actually, I think what ends up being important is like your ability to kind of communicate with everyone from like, uh, curators and artists, to security guards and visitor services and the cleaners and, um... And also yeah, the, the practical aspects of what it means to kind of do public programming, which is my, which is my background too. Um...

It does raise the question of like, "What is a curator?" And I remember being in this like, um, youth session, um, at Whitechapel Gallery. My colleague, who's the curator of youth programs, invited like some of us to come and speak to, um, Duchamp & Sons which is the youth collective at Whitechapel, and they're all like between 16 to 25, I think. And I sat next to this girl who just turned around to me and

she's like, "What even is a curator anyway? Is it just like, just glorified admin essentially?" [LAUGHS] And I was like, "You know what, you're probably not wrong." Like actually there's this like assumption that- and, and this hierarchy when, when you think about the word "curator" and what that lends itself to. Um, and how you're perceived, I guess. And it seems to be this like want of everyone- it, it, if that's the path you're taking to be, to be titled in that way.

But actually what, I guess my question is "What does that mean?" It is, it's the perpetual existential crisis for me. So, um, which is actually why, uh, I recently joined Somerset House because, um, my role is kind of partly a maternity cover, but also, um, kind of spanning this gap at the moment because, uh, the director of studios has gone on maternity leave and the head of studios has taken her role. And I'm, I've taken kind of the longer lead creative projects within that. But the team's really interesting in that like, institutionally, like I feel like this is quite unusual. They've made the conscious decision not to have any in-house kind of curators, so to speak. So actually, a lot of like my team were all producers or programmers or coordinators.

And I think that lends itself to how Somerset House, um, what their relation, what, what the studio's relationship is like with artists and that everything is feels far more artist led. Um, and it feels as though the programme is very much in the hands of the artists and it's their – it becomes their testing ground compared to perhaps other institutions whereby there is this kind of curatorial remit that spans across the programme.

Um, yeah, I guess, and for me it was a bit of a test to see like, um, where I was at, like actually this role- so my current role is Senior Creative Producer, and like, what does that entail? What does that incorporate? Does that incorporate some elements of like curatorial thinking? Yeah, I definitely think so. But also, um, it maybe removes assumptions, um, in another sense. So yeah, I'm, I'm exploring that within my own working life, how that sits with me. Like whether that feels right. Um, but I don't know. It's interesting, like when my

colleague, like said, was talking about this yesterday about how, so he's a producer and how he sometimes doesn't know what his position is. Because we have external curators that come in and we have, and then we're as a team producers. Um, and I thought that was an interesting point, you know, that question of ownership. Who has that ownership over what we do and, like, whether that's an exhibition or a, or a public programme or, yeah.

[00:10:24] **KL:** Was that kind of... when you went to school, uh, for curating, was that conversation around ownership a part of kind of like, "This is the artist's role. Like this is the curator's role"? Like was that a part of that kind of conversation. Or was it... what was that conversation?

[00:10:43] **RL:** I don't even know if there was a conversation at all to be honest, like, um, I came in like probably very naively into, into the whole contemporary art context. Like, um, the MA that I did was a paid MA, so it was a work-based MA, which I, so I wouldn't have been able to afford to go if I hadn't been on this placement. Um, and you had to be an ethnic minority and you had to meet these certain, like, criteria and it was all about, you know, diversifying the workplace, which was, you know, 12 years ago now. So, so it was a slightly different time.

Um, and I think. It was almost, there was this expectation that you had this, like, that curators had this way of speaking. That was to me, like quite incoherent and like, um, hard to get my head around. And it made me think a lot about, um, actually if I'm finding this hard, like how are artists finding this? [LAUGHS] When they're in that situation, talking, talking to a curator, like, um, the language used and everything lends itself to, to, to certain hierarchies, I guess. Or expectations that you, you have certain knowledges. Um, so I guess I was quite cynical in that respect, um, about the course. But at the same time, you know, I think it, um, it opened my eyes up to a lot of like formats and ways of thinking that I probably wouldn't have thought about before being from probably more of a practical design background. So, yeah.

[00:12:35] **KL:** So, in terms of design, architecture, um, the design of spaces, what was your focus in that?

[00:12:46] **RL:** Um, I think actually that's why I wanted to study curating, because what I was interested about was that, um, connection to space and how like you can use space in a temporary way, whereas with architecture, you know, it's a never ending, "Will this even get built?" [LAUGHS] question. Um, like you never really see the things that you design come to fruition, like not at that stage anyway. And like, it excited me that you, that there was this, this world in which like you could put on an event or test out an exhibition and it to be really site specific and to be really kind of catered towards a certain place and space.

So, I think that's where I was coming at curatorially with this kind of, um, mindset of thinking about, yeah, probably a more architecture perspective you could say. And that's what really... so for example, my work placement was at the V&A and that was because of my design background. And um, that's what I loved about things like working on the Friday Late programme cause it was so inherently, like, a part of the spaces and, and it had to, um, it really had to, like, respond.

And I think the amazing thing about the Friday Lates is that, um, you're always having to respond, um, to a collection, to a, um, a location, whether that's, um, an exhibit or a, like permanent collection or whether actually it's a corridor or a staircase or a garden, you know. And, um, I think, yeah, it's exciting because it's temporary, you can experiment, and I think you can get it wrong, and that's, that's okay because it's not something that would ever have a certain permanence like, like architecture would, I guess. Um, so it's more fluid for sure. Um, and that was the, the premise of the V&A Friday Lates is very much about kind of encouraging new audiences into the museum to kind of experience the collections in different ways and to encourage them to explore the museum, which is a like fucking huge

museum, so it's like you need to try and like get people through it somehow, right? Um, and yeah, I was like, my God, this is amazing. Like, um, it's a format I'm not familiar with. It's like, uh, something really exciting to work on. And I was really fortunate that as part of my MA at the, the end, I was able to like curate, or produce, [LAUGHS] or manage whatever you want to call it, like one of the Friday Lates, which was around the relationship of art and architecture. So, kind of went full circle a bit and that was really, really great. I learned a lot at the V&A for better or worse, like yeah.

[00:16:04] **KL:** Um, the, this class that I taught about parties... Yeah. So, this class was originally taught in, I think like 2013 or 14 at Ox-Bow School of the Arts with Shannon Stratton. And um, and then she taught it another two times. Um, also at Ox-Bow School of the Arts, which is within itself like a, it's, um, you know, kind of got started at the same time as like Black Mountain School, like one of these kind of alternative, um, artist educational environments. Art- it has a school and also has an artist residency and it's in Saugatuck, Michigan. It has its own campus, so it's a camp. It's already a place that has a lot of different kinds of, um, spoken and unspoken social rules, different kinds of spaces...

[00:16:46] **RL:** And how, how did that come about?

[00:16:50] **KL:** The party class? Uh, so Shannon Stratton, um, I think that she took over someone's class that was about utopias and she started thinking a lot about, um, kind of like how one person's utopia is completely different than another person's utopia. So, like, what does it mean to talk about like utopia as this like kind of generalized thing that we're all aiming for? Or something. And so, then her class was quite sociological. Most of the texts are kind of are sociological and I kept a good portion of the texts in my class, but then I was able to, um, change it obviously, contribute to it with the things that I wanted to talk about, things that I wanted to focus on, which, um, had a lot to do

with- you know, so this class is kind of right, like parties as social spaces as liminal spaces where, um, you can behave differently and then that can change the way that you understand the world, the way that you act in the world, what the world is even is for you, you know. Um, as these sites of potential for new radical world building. And, um, and so the focus that I had on the class was about how crucial these spaces are, especially for people who have been ostracized by society.

People have been marginalized by society, you know, like, um, one of the texts that I included was from Barack Obama's *Dreams [From] my Father* where he talks about bringing, um, some of his white friends to a Black party (RL: mmm) and how, like after they clearly look uncomfortable, and then after like, I don't know, an hour they asked to leave and so he drives them home and on the way home they're like, "Oh man, is this what you feel like all the time? Like, that must suck." And then he was like, I wanted to punch them. Um, (RL: Jesus Christ) So just this idea that like, like he has to grapple with what it means to be a, um, you know, Black man, like a, um, you know, with a white mother, you know, um, like, growing up in Hawaii. And, um, and, and these white friends from his basketball team can't even be at a party with mostly Black people for an hour.

And, um, so just thought of this, yeah, just this, this, and I mean, that's been my experience of being in social environments sometimes is, right, arriving to them and then realising, like, I'm the only person of colour there. (RL: oh, for sure)

And then being like, I'm gonna kind of have to be on guard through this, um, thing that I was looking forward to as a place of rest, um, like as a place of celebration, as a place of maybe, like, a potential new world building. And I have to be on guard here and...

[00:19:38] **RL:** And it change, it changes everything, doesn't it? And I don't know what your experience was like growing up, but that was definitely, like, my every day, that was my lived experience of being the only



person in a predominantly white world. And um, yeah, it was *super* uncomfortable.

It makes you question, like, how much are you trying to assimilate and how much are you... um, what part of you is real? Because, because you- there is just this guardedness around how you behave, how you act, how you speak, what you eat, like, all of those things. And it's exhausting. So yeah, I think that, like, as you say, it's like to arrive in that context changes it completely, doesn't it?

Um, so yeah, I don't know... That's, that's why I love being in London for example, because it's the only place I've ever felt I can be free. I can walk down the street and no one - and I can be anonymous. And that's quite a rare thing when actually that's most people, you know, the majority of people in the, you know, white people in the U.K., that's their lived experience of being anonymous. And that's, um, it's weird when that's all you want. Like, um, you want to be ignored, so... [LAUGHS]

[00:21:10] **KL:** Yeah, I can't remember, but somebody who said it, maybe it was in an interview, maybe it was a television show, who knows? [LAUGHS] Um, where somebody was like, "I, you know, I want the right to be boring."<sup>1</sup> (RL: yeah! for sure)

Like, I don't, I don't wanna be a, and I say this sometimes, like, especially about my experience, like, living in India, but it's like, I don't wanna be a parade everywhere I go all the time. It's exhausting, like, you said, it's exhausting.

[00:21:37] **RL:** It's really exhausting. And actually, like, that probably again, lends itself to the kind of public, going back to my, not fear of public speaking, but my, I guess, dislike of it is that like, yeah, I'm kind of happy being boring right now. Like, it's a place I've never been for such a long time and I'm in a good place where I can kind of blend into the background. And that's, that's cool, right? Like... um, growing

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<sup>1</sup> Matilda Moors, interview by Kelly Lloyd, 7 April 2019, This Thing We Call Art Archive, online accessed 17 February 2023 <https://www.thisthingwecallart.com/archive/matilda-moors>.

up a Southeast Asian in the Northeast of England in like the nineties, the eighties and nineties was like fucking hideous. Like, so why would I want to repeat any of that essentially, like... Um, so yeah, I guess going back to your comment about parties, like it's also a place that, especially somewhere like London, I think there's a freedom, um, associated with it.

Like it brings people together in a way that I feel, um... a lot of, kind of like the, the art scene like struggles to do. Um, food and music, man, [LAUGHS] and alcohol, like is the way to kind of, yeah get, get people all together in a space without it without it being tokenistic. Like people want to be there, um, to have a good time, right? Like yeah.

[00:23:10] **KL:** So, is that the opportunity for this kind of like late night programming in addition to this opportunity of providing different kinds of invitations into the same space?

[00:23:19] **RL:** Yeah, I mean it's interesting cause I think people don't realize the V&A Friday Late was actually the fir- one of the first Friday Lates. It was started in like the '90s, I think, late '90s. Um, and I guess it was originally meant to kind of span all those areas where like exhibition making, and the more formal public programming doesn't.

And this whole idea of encouraging new audiences like it, it stemmed out of the contemporary programs team at the V&A at the time, which was then restructured while I was there. It was... yeah, it was, it was a mess. Um, And I guess in terms of when I joined the Contemporary Programs team itself was like relatively diverse and that was a result of probably the, the combined, um, relationship with the Inspire programme that at the R.C.A., which, which I was part of. And also, um, other different initiatives I guess to kind of diversify, um, the team. But I think along with that, it meant that the type of programming that happened, um, was reflective of - well, I, I would hope were like, reflective of the team that was programming those events.

So, um, yeah, I guess there was some moments that yeah, were definitely a party. Like, uh, like one of my favourite was being like seven/eight months pregnant and like running a Boiler Room night at the V&A, which was, like, mad, and it was... it was packed and there were queues outside. I was trying to stop people coming in, but like, people would, people who had never been to the museum before were like dancing in the middle of the main entrance. And like, that was like awesome, right? [LAUGHS] That's a way of kind of stir things up a bit. And I think there's a real nervousness, especially within institutions, probably back then especially, to, like, do that kind of programming.

And I'm not saying it's, it was particularly good or slick. It, it definitely wasn't it - but I liked the DIY and the slight anarchy of it all. Um, yeah, that's what I like, I really liked doing until I burnt out because it was just, like, mad and you were doing it every, the last Friday of every month and there was no break, and I was paid like pittance to do what I did. So, yeah. [LAUGHS]

[00:26:01] **KL:** Having been a part of this Inspire programme 12 years ago and having been a part of a kind of change of guard at the V&A (RL: mm-hmm) um, have you seen the kind of art world that you've worked in since then be impacted in really crucial ways by, um, these kinds of targeted, like institutional change. Um, like, is anything... has some diversity actually, like, lasted?

[00:26:34] **RL:** I think that's an interesting question because, um, it lends itself to probably my, like, scepticism about institutions as a whole. But, but only because I, I feel like I've worked in a lot of institutions and have I myself become like institutionalized in that respect, right? Because, um, you accept certain ways of thinking. Um, I don't know if Inspire did that. I think there was a lot of problems with the programme, but then at the same time there's - my peers are now working, you know, predominantly within, um, the museum and gallery sector and, and have, like, lead roles, you know, lead roles in that. So that's

essentially what they wanted to achieve, right? So, I get. In, in that regard. That's been, that's been beneficial.

Um, but then I have real scepticism around, you know, the Black Lives Matter protests, which were happening in 2020 and, and museum and galleries responses to that. And it suddenly, um, being this very like, um, tokenistic, like, acknowledgement of what has been happening for centuries anyway. Like... and this need to, to diversify and this need to, um, to be very public about that. And yeah, I don't, I don't know how I feel because also what happens is a lot of people do stay in their jobs for a really long time too, right? Yeah, how truly inherently part of that culture can that become. Like, how, how can that be an actual every day like it, it is probably a lot better now, I'm sure, but... Um, yeah. I dunno, I don't know the answer to that question so much.

[00:28:38] **KL:** Do you know if that, um, the Inspire programme is still going on?

[00:28:44] **RL:** No, we were the last cohorts, there were only two years. It was a very small programme, so there was maybe only like 10 to 12 students per, um, per intake. Yeah. Um, and yeah, it was linked to the R.C.A., so it was alongside the regular curating programme too. So, which I, I think especially for the first co- cohort. there was a clash there, you know, between obviously like students who are paying a hell of a lot of money to be at the college and, and people who are being fully funded to be there.

Um, so they probably picked up the, um... more of those issues. So, by the time we joined, which was the year after, I think a lot of the kind of initial problems had been not ironed out, but we had a good relationship with the other cohort, like, the other students, which was great and I'm still in touch with a number of them now. So, it becomes a network, I guess...

[00:29:52] **KL:** Why wasn't the programme continued? Was that like a point of contention when you were a student there about like, "We're the last cohort, like, why..."

[00:30:02] **RL:** "What's happening?" Um, yeah, I don't know. I don't know. Um, I think it was just like a set amount of time that the funding would happen for. So, yeah.

[00:30:13] **KL:** So, so can you tell me about the comics festival?

[00:30:17] **RL:** Mmm. So, I went on maternity leave after the V&A, I had my first child, and, um... while I was on maternity leave, like then was kind of working out what to do because I was paid so little that, like, if I went back to the V&A... because at the time, like after my MA I applied for and then was given, had the role of, like, I took the role of Friday Late coordinator, which was essentially running programming, curating the Friday Lates, and I did that for like, two years. And so, it was a real dilemma in my head of like, "Can I go back part-time? Probably not." Like, because of the amount of work it takes to put on a Friday Late every month.

I had this real like, um, like dilemma because I needed to pay my rent. Like, and I needed to also like look after my kid. So, um, I started thinking about like, freelancing and one of the curators at the V&A, um, and there had been this Friday Late about, uh, like self-publishing and zine making. And as part of that, Nobrow who are an independent publisher, um, was kind of part of that whole programme. And then asked, uh, one of the curators to come on board to help run for E.L.C.A.F. (East London Comics & Arts Festival), which is this like, was this amazing like DIY self-publishing community. Um, so they did that for two years, I think, while I was still at the V&A.

And then when I went on maternity leave and I decided to go freelance, they were like, "Well, actually we really need some help doing the public programme for E.L.C.A.F." Um, so I came on board,

um, handed my notice in at the V&A, um, and this became my, like, regular source of income for like six years, um... It was funded by the Arts Council, but then we also had to - managed to fund it through like ticket sales and other support through like cultural institutions. We had like international artists fly in and, um, worked with like Goethe Institute, the Finnish Institute, all, all sorts. Um, and it was, it was amazing because it was such a, um, such a contrast to kind of the institutional remit of the V&A and just being- for it to be really kind of DIY and free.

And, and we were a really tiny team, and we did everything from like, programming and speaking to the artists, to selecting the artists who would have stalls there, um, to like building the actual stalls, [LAUGHS] and um, cleaning floors, you know, all, everything. We did everything, um. So, I really loved that.

And then obviously, um, the curator who was leading it at the time, then she had so many other commitments, she left. And then it ended up being two of us, uh, left over. I had a second child at the time of E.L.C.A.F. too. Um, and the last Arts Council, um, Projects Grant we had was for two years, and we were very fortunate to have that at the very start of the pandemic.

So, we found out we had that funding like maybe two months, no, probably like three months, three or four months before the pandemic started. And then obviously that shifted, but it meant that we had funding for those two years during the pandemic, which was an absolute life saver. And we did, we moved online, and we did like a poster pack that we sent out to people that we sold. We did a huge amount of pub- online public programming and stuff. And yeah, that was, that was a good time, man. Illustrators and like, and comic artists are like the nicest people. Like it's a community, it's a family. Um, and a, you know, quite a lot of people that actually were from Friday Lates, artists I'd worked with, um, were also part of the festival too. So, it, it felt really good.

[00:34:41] **KL:** So, um, at that point, did you get this job as a L.C.N. mentor? Was there like a, you know...

[00:34:48] **RL:** Oh man. So that was like 2014. So, like, um, that took me up to the pandemic, 2020, which, so actually I have been doing E.L.C.A.F. for longer. I tell a lie. But while I was doing E.L.C.A.F., I was doing, picking up a lot of other freelance work. So, like, um, did work for Museum of London and that was putting on more late-night programming. Um, I did research for Wellcome Collection. So, there's a, a glasses exhibition that's just opened this year, and it was like however many years in the making. So, I was- did the, helped with the early research for that.

And, um, like, City of London event managing, you know, or I picked up whatever, whatever I was offered. And I was fortunate because a lot of these offerings came from like, people I'd worked with, at the V&A particularly. So that really kind of built up my experience and, um, and so, because that in a way that I'd been working on so many different projects, and that's the advantage of being freelance, right? You kind of like, you hop around a lot, and you have these freedoms, but also the continuous stress of never knowing when you're next - like whether you're gonna pay your rent the following month. So, like, L.C.N. came up when, well it was just like in, it was in the pandemic, right, wasn't it?

[00:36:15] **KL:** Maybe like the second lockdown, third lockdown maybe?

[00:36:21] **RL:** Yeah, exactly. (KL: maybe the third lockdown) And I was panicked. Like I, I had, I got a grant from like the a-n, you know, um, network to help support me during the pandemic. And LCN came up and it just made so much sense because I feel like while I'd been hopping around and doing all these different bits for different places, like one thing was really clear was that like I really loved talking to artists. And I really enjoyed, like seeing how they were doing and helping, like, supporting them in, you know, in whatever way I could. Whether that

was through, like the commissioning process or, or through conversations I'd have at the festival, or, you know, seeing an artist go from being really emerging, like, which was a lot of like Friday Late artists to, to being super, like, established working with huge high-end brands and stuff like, um, that was amazing for me.

So, L.C.N. felt like, yeah, if this is something that where I can try and like be able to have like actual full-blown hour-long conversations with artists and help support them through that, then like, I'd love to be part of that. And, like, yeah, it was amazing, it was a real turning point for me actually, L.C.N. Cause I don't know how you felt about it, but it was a really, um, precarious time for everyone and a really emotional time and there was a lot of... um, it, it was really difficult and, but I felt, I actually like, "Okay, this is something I'm good at, like I can listen to people." And, and that's, I guess, gotta gotta count for something, especially now, especially during the pandemic. Yeah.

[00:38:20] **KL:** Um... yeah, no, I mean, I think it's funny, like, I think Karen's the best boss I've ever had.

[00:38:25] **RL:** You're right, like, Karen's an amazing boss because she cares. And it, it's quite worrying that, um, that that can be so rare that it can be surprising that actually you have someone in a senior role that cares.

And so, it really made me think not only about what it means to be an artist and to practice, especially within the pandemic, and what they need from us. And that, as you say, is like a sounding board and, and just another pair of ears, right? And like, it's not for us to say too, you know, how their practice should be because that's the beauty of art practice that it shouldn't be defined by what other people think. But at the same time, it's like, what, what's needed is this, like, sense of care within, like, institutions, within the frameworks that are created, like, within the art world, and how do we get to those points? And I think L.C.N. (London Creative Network), for me was a really good example of how we could just, just fucking listen. Right?



Um, and I think it was pivotal for all of us. And it also made me way more critical about my own work and, and the roles I, I was taking on and almost like being at Whitechapel (Gallery) was like, okay, that's, that's the job I probably should do, but what happens to the artist, like, after you've commissioned them for a public program? Like, what happens to that relationship? Does that continue? Does it just end there? Is it, like, are you just using them for the benefit of your own public program? Like, what is, what the fuck is that?

Which is what interested me so much about working in a studios context. So, it all goes full circle, right, because L.C.N. was linked to SPACE, which is studios, which means there's this kind of longevity that doesn't exist unless institutions have that framework. And I'm not saying it's totally like the framework that everyone should aim for at all, but I think that's what I was so intrigued, um, at about Somerset House Studios was this, this very different way of working with artists to create these, like, longer relationships and more hopefully like moments of care. These checking in points, right, that I think is very hard to do if you do not have artists like physically residing in your buildings. Or, and, or where that's really hard to do when, um, working in the industry. You're so burnt out and you're so tired and you're so exhausted, yet you still are expected to continue these conversations and to be able to offer that element of care.

When actually where's the care for yourself? Where's the care for the staff as well, in order for that additional care to be facilitated properly, and, like, with due diligence? It all goes full circle really, doesn't it? Um, which is why I'm still cynical in, uh, in my perpetual existential crisis and will eventually probably just buy a v-, a van and sell ice cream because who doesn't love ice cream, right? And that's care. [LAUGHS] Like, that's food and that's sugar. [LAUGHS] Like...

[00:42:07] **KL:** And you're still cynical because, um, you don't necessarily see a lot of opportunities that allow for this kind of longer-term care being made by kind of, like, large art institutions?

[00:42:23] **RL:** Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. Which is why it's, it's a unique thing to have artists' studios in a large institution. I think there's, um, it's a unique position to be in and I think with that comes additional problems, but also, like, huge benefits in the conversations that you can have. Which you just don't have the time for in, in other contexts. In, you know, if you are running a public programme, you're expected to kind of put-on weekly talks and workshops whilst also like thinking larger picture two years ahead.

Like, you know, it's madness. And no one's paid enough for it, so [LAUGHS] it, it's, so you're also dealing with the, of how do you live day to day and how do you, like, finance yourself? And add to that if you have a family and you're trying to, like, maintain having children in somewhere like London because of course you need to be in London and... cause that's the where the freedom - your own freedom and anonymity lies.

So, it's the perpetual, like reel, how do you get off that? Um, so I think there's a lot to be said about care and just listening. L.C.N. definitely opened my eyes up to a lot more and made me probably less cynical.

[00:43:47] **KL:** So, yeah, one of the things that I wanted to talk to you about, just to, like, have it on the record or whatever was um, so we had the event at Whitechapel. Um, and um, I had spoken to, I think the person who does your sound.

[00:44:03] **RL:** Sam.

[00:44:04] **KL:** Sam.

[00:44:29] **RL:** Yeah.

[00:44:05] **KL:** And then I, um, was like, "How long do you think it'll take?" And he was like, "Oh, like a week or something." And then I didn't tell anybody that um, I had a fast turnaround. (RL: yeah) And so, what

happened was I wanted to release it as a part of the middle of the series, whereas now I'm just like, *what a stupid idea. Obviously release it at the end.* Um, and because I assumed Whitechapel would have like thousands of staff or whatever, it was like, *okay, they told me week we're gonna do a week.* Whereas when I work with artists, um, obviously there's like so many soft deadlines. And I didn't, I didn't communicate any of this to you. (RL: yeah) And um, and so, then the, um, the event happened, um, of course, Sam got Covid. And, um, there wasn't anybody that could send me the recording even and I think somebody actually came in like on a Saturday to, to try to send it to me. And then it was like one of the tracks was missing. I was getting really stressed out because, um, I was kind of getting some push from like, um, one of my distributors and so I was pushing you and then you had a moment where you were just like, "I need to take care of my people", you know, and it was just really instructive for me in terms of, like, how do you communicate clearly with everybody? And how do you in-build time so that you have that time to care? (RL: mm-hmm) Um, how do you not assume things of anybody that you work with, (RL: yeah) regardless of if they're an individual or an institution or a team?

[00:45:43] RL: Yeah, I think, cause we've already talked about this obviously, like after it all happened and we had a conversation about it and like, I think it is really good cause I think we're both very, like, upfront people. We're Scorpios, right? So that's what we do. And I think there's, um, it's really important for us to be able to have this conversation. I think it ca- it was in March, wasn't it? So, um, we had this huge, large event, you know, we had several events every week. Sam then got Covid and so wasn't able to kind of be part of the very first kind of takeover series, which was, which I was trying to initiate at Whitechapel, which was like, kind of a late Friday equivalent at Whitechapel would be First Thursdays.

So, there was a lot of pressure on all sides. And actually, this goes back to the care element. I think there's sometimes an

assumption that when you work in an institution like Whitechapel or any other large institution, that there's a lot of support systems in place when actually at Whitechapel, in terms of public programme, it, it is kind of really just, like, me and Sam, because... it was me and Sam, shall I say, um, cause I have left now. [LAUGHS] So, I, and the, the pressure is insurmountable.

The amount of time, of your personal time as well as your, like, the time you're meant to be working was... yeah, it was insurmountable because it, there, there was so much pressure on all sides. Having said this, I think we also as an institution, as me as the curator of, of public programs, has a duty of care to the people that I'm working with, right?

So that's Sam for sure, but also the artist. So, I think it's from my side, and, and we've spoken about this too, like I, I think it's important I learned from that experience in terms of, like, working out that it needs to be communicated more, you know? That there needs to be levels of communication whereby was saying like, look, the-explaining what, what actually the system is like inside. Cause I don't think people see that. But then I guess it's having that time to do that, and I think that's, that was the problem, wasn't it? It was just a lack of time. Um, and during, yeah, have - someone having Covid just threw everything [LAUGHS] out of the box. Um, and made it an incredibly tricky month. But like, I think all these, all these moments and all these like things that have happened, continue to, like, build up that question in my head around care. And what are we really like valuing in terms of like our positions, as like programmers as like kind of maintaining these, like, these structures, these art structures. Like, actually, what is that doing to the people that are within those systems, and that are trying to kind of make the best of, I guess, quite a bad situation, [LAUGHS] often, more often than not.

And it shouldn't be that way, like, we should have enough time for someone else to come in and find the audio for your recording. You know, I, I shouldn't have to turn around to you and say, "I can't give you this." Like, it's not, it's not okay, is it? And I think that's

probably reflective of this, like, breakdown that can often happen when you're so kind of overworked and then one- the person you rely on really heavily goes under, like there's no support systems for that.

So, I got Covid for example, in, in July when I was like, due to, um, you know, those Nocturnal Creatures, which was like the big multi-site festival that happens every year. Um, and that for me was, like, breaking point because there was no one to pick up that work. Like as much as my team, and I say, "my team", but you know, we're talking education team as a whole. Like no one within like the public programming, there is no - you know, the team is... was me. So, it was like, um, I found that really difficult cause I found myself back in that position of, um, when I was at the V&A and being overstretched and overworked and underpaid. And it's only afterwards that people are like, "Oh yeah, there's, you know, we really value you. We really think, you know, um, there's been such an amazing programme. Oh, but you've left now and you, you don't, we're not paying you anymore now, by the way. But like, um, but we're gonna put other systems in in place to make this better."

That that's great, but that doesn't resolve it for you. It's just that *constant* cycle that I find myself in. And like, I think especially with, um, which is probably why I'm so, like, at the moment, taking on these shorter-term contracts cause I, I remain cynical, and I remain almost, like, waiting for myself to burn out and not be able to kind of, um, um, to do due diligence and, and, and do good by people. And that's not a position I want to be in again. So, it's, um, yeah, that was a hard time. [LAUGHS] It was a hard time for sure.

[00:51:42] **KL:** And I am, I am sorry for my part in that and...

[00:51:47] **RL:** No, no, you have, you have nothing to apologize for. And we've had this conversation. [LAUGHS]

[00:51:51] **KL:** Yeah. Still sorry though. Um, and I appreciate, yeah, being able to talk to you about this. (RL: yeah) Okay. You gotta go. Very last

question. (RL: yeah) We can do it real quick. (RL: yeah, sure) Um... uh, did we talk about what, you thought we would talk about, or do you have any questions for me, or do you have anything else you'd just like to say?

[00:52:10] **RL:** Um, I, I've really enjoyed talking to you as much as I also hate talking. [LAUGHS] Um, I probably sounded incredibly cynical throughout this whole conversation, but I'm still here and I'm still working within the art field for whoever wants to offer me a job next. [LAUGHS] So, like, um, as long as I can kind of pay my, um, pay my bills every month and like, get some joy in what I'm doing.

Like right now, I'm really enjoying having conversations with artists and that's a really nice position to be in right now. And, um, yeah, I hope that we can continue to be critical of the world that we're working in and that we can continue to be, um, to think about the fact that actually what's important is the people within, within, um, this field. And it's the care that we offer them, to artists and those working in the industry. It needs to be across the board. Like cause right now it's not happening, and it needs - there needs to be more of it. So, that's what I would say.

[00:53:27] **KL:** So good. Thank you so much.

[00:53:29] **RL:** Thank you.

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[00:53:35] **KL:** You can find more information about Ruth Lie and her work as well as links to what we spoke about today and other interviews with people in the arts, on the project's website [thisthingwecallart.com](http://thisthingwecallart.com)

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Thanks so much for listening, and tune in next week for my conversation with Katriona Beales.