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# Connecting creativity, value and money

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# Connecting Creativity, Value and Money

Bob Last 2016



# About Bob

Bob Last has vast experience in the creative industries, starting in the business as an independent record label owner, producer and manager and subsequently producing feature films and documentaries including Sylvain Chomet's multi award-winning and Oscar-nominated *The Illusionist*, Terence Davies's critically acclaimed *Sunset Song*, and BAFTA-winning children's animated series *Ooglies*.

For a decade he has actively engaged with public policy issues impacting creative businesses and was Chair of the Board for Cultural Enterprise Office from 2009-2014.

## With thanks to:

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The staff of Cultural Enterprise Office and in particular Deborah Keogh, former Chief Executive, for setting the project in motion.

The interviewees, all of whom gave generously of their time and spoke fearlessly: Alan Pert, Partner, NORD; Martin Boyce, Sculptor; Hilary Grant, Knitwear designer; David Thomson, Ludometrics; Stewart Henderson, Chemikal Underground; Alistair McAuley, founding partner, Timorous Beasties; Jamie Byng, Publisher and Managing Director, Canongate Publishing; Kirsteen Stewart, Fashion and Textile designer; Ziggy Campbell, founding member of design collective and band, Found; Sophie Kyle, Proprietor, The Skinny; Christy Cole, Partner, Briggs & Cole; Sheila Fleet, Jeweller; Stephen Marshall, Global Marketing Manager, Dewar's.

Diane Campion and David Rutherford.

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*Humpty Dumpty in Lewis Carroll's Through The Looking Glass famously asserted in a scornful tone: "When I use a word it means just what I choose it to mean – nothing more nor less." For policy, which lives as language before it can become action, this is a tempting but dangerous approach. Furthermore, where creativity, imagination and cultural content are concerned, clarity becomes even more challenging...*

# Connecting Creativity, Value and Money

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# Foreword: Professor Philip Schlesinger

It is a particular pleasure to write this Foreword. My research at the University of Glasgow's Centre for Cultural Policy Research (CCPR) has brought me into close contact with the work behind this report and, of course, with its author, Bob Last.

On 9 November 2015, CCPR ran a specially convened seminar to discuss *Connecting Creativity, Value and Money*.<sup>1</sup> These findings had never before been given a public airing, and I strongly felt there was a need to remedy this. Bob Last has posed a challenge because he critically interrogates some dominant approaches to creative industries policy. He also investigates, by way of detailed interviews, what those engaged in cultural work actually think about the relationship between their creative activity and economic value. Funded by the Scottish Government, his report was researched under the auspices of Cultural Enterprise Office (CEO), and happily, is finally in the public domain.

Our CCPR seminar brought together the worlds of politics, policy, cultural work and the academy from north and south of the border. It was an open-minded, robust and in many ways, quite subtle discussion, free of the predictable and tedious grandstanding, axe-grinding and defensive position-taking that routinely characterises the plethora of events – often cynical money-spinners – on the creative economy. We do need more open debate and so I hope that this publication will engender it, and perhaps the contrarian discussion it provokes might even begin to affect the policy thinking of the Scottish Government – and maybe others furth of Scotland.

There is a back-story, of course, because *Connecting Creativity, Value and Money* underwent interesting mutations that speak to our times. Bob Last and I first discussed how to study creative micro-businesses in January 2012. He was then working on his research proposal, which focused on how such enterprises might access finance. I had just finished a study of dancers and musicians and was very aware of the tensions that existed between their need to earn a living and their creative concerns.<sup>2</sup> We were both

very attuned to the challenges posed by precarious cultural work and the difficulties of devising the right kinds of intervention to support it.

Later that year, our paths crossed again, when I pursued a new research idea. At the time, Bob was chair of CEO's board. Along with Deborah Keogh, then CEO's Director, he was very receptive to CCPR undertaking a sociological study of how their organisation worked. Funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, that project began on 1 April 2013. My colleagues on the research team were Drs Melanie Selfe and Ealasaid Munro. Our project resulted in a book, *Curators of Cultural Enterprise*.<sup>3</sup>

Fortuitously, then, while Bob Last was researching and writing this report, the CCPR team was studying CEO. In a double take, while conducting one study of support for creative businesses, I was asked to join the advisory board of another. What was especially interesting was to observe how the very process of research changed Bob Last's view of what was important.

Bob started his work in quite a conventional place, concerned about securing access to finance for 'creative micro-businesses', these (according to the European Commission) being businesses with 10 employees or less than 2 million euros of turnover. 'I wish' is doubtless what many would say in that sector. The starting point was: 'Where could the finance come from and how could better support be devised to help the creative sector in Scotland?' The project moved quite a distance and in many ways can be read as first and foremost a study of the values at play in cultural work – accessed by way of 13 very interesting interviews.

This has resulted in grounded reflections on how these values and beliefs constitute strategies pursued in a 'cultural economy'. Bob Last's choice of this latter term is not accidental: it is intended to challenge the rote invocation of the 'creative economy' – which is a blockage to thought – and to push us to think harder about the non-economic relations that pertain in the sphere of cultural production.

Why is this report important? Because

it can help us to address what is presently a vacuum in policy thinking in Scotland. We have both a confusing landscape of support bodies and a need to articulate a clear vision for cultural policy, which seems increasingly likely to embrace further aspects of public service media. There is the potential, given Scotland's scale, to do things differently from the rest of the UK, and more inventively. Because, under devolution, cultural policy is a fully autonomous competence of Scottish government, there is nothing to stop the invention of new models here and the trying out of distinctive approaches. The time has come to step away from a long term policy dependency on the orthodoxy of creative economy thinking minted in London some 20 years ago, which still really dominates the scene, both in the UK and internationally.

The broad parameters set by New Labour, and then shared by the coalition governments north and south of the border, are presently largely embraced by the Conservative government in London, and also substantially by the SNP government in Edinburgh. In lieu of wider cultural debate we are routinely bombarded with headline figures about employment and GVA – which are certainly important indicators of economic importance, but they are not the be-all and end-all. The effect of the overwhelmingly economic shaping of public discussion has been to crowd out more serious and rounded thinking about what goes on in the cultural space, the values of those who work in it, and by implication its valuation by the public. And that is precisely where Bob Last's work is centred. Writing as a reader of his work, that is one of the central things I take from it.

*Connecting Creativity, Value and Money* was produced at a particular moment in CEO's life. There was then a drive to engage in advocacy and research. Bodies such as CEO are extremely well placed to draw on their knowledge of how creative work is conducted, given their first hand engagement in practice and, under the right conditions, and with appropriate skills, they could turn such know-how

into research not otherwise available.

This would offer something usefully distinct from the more formulaic work of creative consultancy, which is set up to meet the needs of each passing client. Whether CEO, and bodies like it, can capitalise in future on a special knowledge base of how cultural work is conducted, remains a possibility to be pursued. There can be little doubt, however, that in part at least, the present report's insight derives from its author's own understanding, developed over many years, of what it takes to put deals and creative teams together and the kinds of trade-off such ventures entail.

In *Curators of Cultural Enterprise*, my colleagues and I have questioned the value of the creative industries as an idea. We need to think more in the round about cultural work, in ways that stress non-economic values while, at the same time, recognising, crucially, that people do have to make a living. Although he arrived there by his own route, Bob Last's work is aligned with a strand of academic literature that is concerned with precarious work and the uncertainties and risks of the creative sector. That line of argument is presently the minority report on the creative economy, and likely to be so for the foreseeable future, although there are some signs of an increasing international challenge to the creative economy orthodoxy.

At the CCPR seminar, there was considerable discussion about language and meaning – some significant questioning of the dominant terms of reference, sometimes from surprising quarters. The responses made in our debate about *Connecting Creativity, Value and Money* showed, on the one hand, a concern with aesthetics, emotion, and intricate practice, and on the other hand, the need to deal realistically with what funders best understand, which is the measurement of outcomes. There is no ducking the need for accountability where public money is used to intervene in the public interest. But perhaps it is now time to open up a new debate on what are the most sensible terms for this exercise.

One resonant and recurrent line of discussion at our seminar concerned the potentialities and the particularities of

Scotland. There was a repeated stress by many participants on how cultural endeavours might be made to work for a general interest. This means challenging the dominance of a conception of creativity that emphasises individualism and individual benefit – no small matter. Addressing this question might presage the start of some new thinking.

It is precisely to encourage such further debate that, in collaboration with CEO, this report is being published as a CREATE Working Paper. For the past four years, along with my principal work in CCPR, I have hung one of my academic hats in CREATE on whose behalf I welcome the chance to give an airing to this thoughtful report.

CREATE is a key, international locus for analytical work on the creative economy and self-evidently an appropriate intellectual home for Bob Last's work. Although his study is firmly grounded in creatives' experience of working in Scotland, readers will readily recognise that the issues he considers undoubtedly transcend national boundaries.

<sup>1</sup>For the seminar's programme and attendance list see: [http://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/cca/research/ccpr/newsandevents/headline\\_434353\\_en.html](http://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/cca/research/ccpr/newsandevents/headline_434353_en.html).

<sup>2</sup>Philip Schlesinger and Charlotte Waelde, 'Copyright and cultural work', *Innovation – The European Journal of Social Science Research* 25(1): 11-28.

<sup>3</sup>Philip Schlesinger, Melanie Selfe and Ealasaid Munro, *Curators of Cultural Enterprise: A Critical Analysis of a Creative Business Intermediary*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. For a detailed discussion of Bob Last's research project, see pp.93-99.

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#### Bionote

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# 1

## Introduction

In 1901, GK Chesterton, in a defence of “penny dreadfuls”, the commercial writing of the time, criticised a tendency to underestimate “humanity minus ourselves”. This remains a useful blandishment in the 21st century; debate and struggle around culture and creativity are dogged by a sense that the ‘other’ is talking about something different entirely. This paper is written with policy-making in mind but also hopes to speak to those on whom policy acts and impacts. It may at times recap thoughts that are, from one perspective or the other, blindingly obvious. When it does, it does so in the immodest hope of facilitating wider understandings. Chesterton’s defence of the “penny dreadfuls” more than a century ago reminds us that debate around what is currently commonly termed “the creative industries” is not new.

Humpty Dumpty in Lewis Carroll’s *Through The Looking Glass* famously asserted in a scornful tone: “When I use a word it means just what I choose it to mean – nothing more nor less.” For policy, which lives as language before it can become action, this is a tempting but dangerous approach. Furthermore, where creativity, imagination and cultural content are concerned, clarity becomes even more challenging as it is necessary to engage with ideas; with intangibles that resist rigorous and unambiguous mapping to any measure.

Connecting Creativity, Value and Money sets out to take a snapshot, in particular, of micro-businesses in the creative industries, specifically looking at Scotland. Actor is used in this paper in a sense akin to its (asexual) use in systems reasoning. It is used to identify a component in the creative and cultural ecosystem; as a portmanteau term for those hewing and welding installations and performances, wrangling words, those whose palette is drawn from ones and zeros and pixels, those tunnellers through the cultural substrate, the sign-posters at the top of the populist mountain,

the craftsmen and craftswomen, the mendicants and the entrepreneurs whose collective foment makes up the cultural economy and the creative industries that fall within it. Numerical evidence around the scale and shape of the sector has been examined but the emphasis of this paper’s new research has been on the voice of practitioners and entrepreneurs themselves; the actors within the ecosystem, seeking wider applicable insights.

In 1967 Roland Barthes asked: “Why does fashion utter clothing so abundantly? Why does it interpose, between the object and its user, such a luxury of words (not to mention images), such a network of meaning?” It turns out that the complexity of language around what we currently consider the creative industries has a long history. In the 17th century one John Evelyn controversially asserted the idea that the architect *verborum*, skilled in the use of words and whose job was to interpret architecture, was a crucial and intrinsic part of the architectural process. It is worth recognising that the disproportionate noise around policy and the creative industries, the constant public negotiations of success or failure in the media, the blogosphere and academia, should not be stigmatised as a strictly contemporary challenge.

The complexity and constant presence of unsettled debate is itself evidence of the intangible values embedded within private and public constructions of much of what is considered to constitute the creative industries, and the importance our society attaches to them.

The presence of intangible values across a range of businesses from large publishing houses to start-up knitting businesses emerges strongly from the interviews conducted for this paper. For those with the ambition to assist these industries effectively, immersion in a matrix of intangibles is inescapable, although perhaps like a baptism, it can be confined to a one-off dip so as not to inhibit action.



2

**Sfumato**

In a predecessor to this paper it was pointed out that, unlike say “coal mining” or “arms manufacture”, the term “creative” is itself slippery. It often appears that different actors use the term in connection with different problems, actions and opportunities. Policy must be wary of similar slips. It may not help, for example, to conflate the needs of someone who defines the value of their work primarily in terms of cultural value with the needs of a business prepared to adjust, change and reinvent its output in search of economic validation just because they both deploy creativity in their business.

Where the creative industries are concerned, much has been made of their economic value and potential. Whilst actors within the sector espouse and pursue economic goals, our interviews tend to confirm that these goals are nonetheless embedded in the pursuit of a more complex set of metaphysical values; intangibles. The interviews reveal tensions between the accrual and pursuit of economic value and the value perceived by the actors in the ecosystem, in their practice and businesses, but they also suggest that the pursuit of a broader matrix of values is intrinsic to the successful pursuit of economic goals, rather than inimical to it.

Crucially the interviews suggest that the sector places a “value” on values. It therefore not only holds “values” but trades in them and can accrue value or metaphysical capital often in a portfolio that includes, but is not always in sync with, economic value. The location within a business and the taxonomy of these values is difficult to determine, not least because they are commonly

inscribed within matrices of intuition and instinct, of being in the know, of being cool; conundrums both outgoing and at one and the same time reticent not to say recondite, placing a taboo on their articulation.

As if metaphysical values and the accrual of metaphysical value are not tricky enough, the stock-in-trade of much of the creative industries is emotional content. Stephen Marshall, former brand manager at Dewar’s, when asked what was the key measure he used to rationalise the often surprising and unconditional donations the brand has made to sometimes arcane creative endeavours of varying commercial ambition, stated that the activities “added emotional value to the Dewar’s brand”. This concise valuation of values also draws attention to the easiest contemporary metaphor for the location of intangibles, that of brand value.

Beyond the tideline of emotional content lurks pleasure. It is possible to watch a film about death and be emotionally uplifted and for it to be a pleasurable experience – little more is needed to illustrate why pinning down a granular analysis of metaphysical value, emotional content and pleasure is beyond the scope of this paper. For our purpose, emotional content and pleasure are wrapped up in the sense of metaphysical values that stand alongside economic values.

The constructions around value deployed in this paper may well traduce long canons of cultural theory, philosophy and economic work on value, but it is not possible to get a handle on the creative industries without plunging in. It is my personal experience over a number of

decades producing and working across popular music, television, visual arts and film that pleasure, emotional content and metaphysical values are embedded in almost every decision made within the creative industries and cultural sector.

Actors within the ecosystem not only accrue and trade in metaphysical value “intangibles”, the active sharing of these intangible values emerges as a constant theme in interviews, creating a collective capital that is open-source in nature, that thrives in the public domain, that is a source of validation for the contributor and that can be drawn down by all and, of especial note, is free to use for start-ups.

This collective capital is not free to create. It arises from the sometimes labour and resource-intensive production and propagation of intangible value embedded within some creative industries and the cultural economy, but its creation is selfless. No amount of legal protection of intellectual property can contain it once work, a product containing and reflecting these intangibles, is marketed to the wider world (although censorship could be seen as an attempt to constrain this collective capital). In order to share in or draw down from this collective capital it is not necessary to possess a specific work or artefact; once any such work or artefact is talked about, written about, tweeted about, loaned or re-sampled then its intangible value is in circulation. The creation of this collective capital may require substantial economic activity but not only is it free to use, its value does not need to be written down over time and, interestingly, use does not use up this collective capital. If anything, use further enhances its value and scale.

# 3

**Policy matters**

There is at this particular moment in Scotland a clear recognition of the importance of the cultural and creative sector and a desire to constructively engage. Policy sets out to achieve goals; the success of policy is measured against those goals. It is important to recognise that it is politically legitimate for the goal of policy to be broader or narrower than the goals of those impacted by the policy. Understandably, those impacted by policy often have difficulty accepting that a policy that affects them, or is directed at them, may not be all about them and that the political legitimacy of a policy may be based on broader, democratically-endorsed goals.

As with the practice of the actors in the creative and cultural ecosystem, policy goals also commonly have values embedded in them, in the sense of metaphysical value as opposed to the economic value chain. Metaphysical values espoused by the policy maker or enshrined in the policy makers' democratic mandate often benefit from clear linear mappings between metaphysical and economic values. For example, when a job is created, the gain in the employees' well-being can also be mapped to both the improved economic circumstances and productivity of those who gain a job and the economic savings on welfare support.

One can see this process operating across the 15 National Outcomes embraced by the Scottish Government and the National Performance

Framework that seeks to allow the monitoring of success against these outcomes and, presumably, provides a framework against which new policy can be mapped and tested.

The relationship between values and economic outcomes appears complex and less linear within the cultural economy and creative industries. Some would argue that many efforts by government to intervene in the creative industries and the cultural economy have not resolved the challenges highlighted very well. Within the UK there have, for decades, been regular eruptions of highly articulate reaction to this perceived failure that reads as if policy and the institutions that implement it are succubi or incubi. The stakes are high.

Common sense suggests that, in any scenario, for a policy to work it must either be aligned with the goals and values of those it seeks to impact, or must be able to map the connection between the policy goals and the goals and values of those impacted. Without such convergence or mapping, any policy is at very high risk of being inefficient, ineffectual or, worse, counterproductive.

Misaligned policy risks introducing noise and friction into a system, reducing the system's effectiveness and undermining policy goals whatever they may be. In a nightmare scenario, more policy then creates more noise and friction in the system, further undermining its own goals.

# 4

**Who is creative  
and industrious?**

The UK and Scottish Governments rely on statistics collected by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) as their key quantitative measure of economic activity and value. These statistics are backed up by a legal obligation on a business to supply information. The statistics are based on assigning raw data to SIC codes that are enshrined in the global economy via the UN (International Standard Industrial Classification of All Economic Activities). SIC codes rarely directly match any understanding of the creative industries currently held or contemplated.

The Scottish Government has recently published its own allocation of SIC codes to the creative industries. This is broadly reflective of the UK Government's DCMS allocations but does differ in significant respects. The Scottish Government statistics reflect a definition of the creative industries in which what is commonly understood as the arts are measured as a subset of the creative industries envelope, yet the policy of the government is clearly not to treat the arts as a subset of the creative industries, but rather to recognise their distinct importance.

However, the difficulty with the ONS-derived statistics does not end with the problems of matching or apportioning SIC codes to a construct of creative industries. The ONS data collection is likely to entirely miss freelance labour operating below the VAT threshold, which most studies suggest makes up greater than 50% of the sector across various measures of the creative industries. The ONS is also liable to miss short life spikes in activity which are a very common pattern in sector entities that often do not have steady or linear growth trajectories. Furthermore, they likely miss the activity of single purpose vehicles (SPVs) that are the core model of film production and some other content production.

A further issue specific to Scotland is the BBC. The BBC looms large in the creative industries, however the Scottish Government statistics remove its turnover on the grounds that it is, in effect, a tax. Yet the employment numbers for the BBC are counted – meaning for

example that any attempt to look at employment as a function of turnover or business activity in the sector is massively distorted. However, nationally-funded companies who receive most, if not all, of their funding directly from government, and thus the taxpayer, are included in the ONS-derived statistics, which is arguably inconsistent with the treatment of the BBC.

Therefore, ONS-derived numerical measures are not likely to be particularly accurate in terms of scale or change in the sector, even where the apportionment of SIC codes is consistent or meaningful. The struggle to match ONS data collected against SIC codes to a definition or conception of the creative industries is ongoing. What is, for the ONS data, “dark matter”, could be a crucial or even the greater part of the creative industries and the cultural economy; an unmeasured social and economic value.

We hope our look at a snapshot of actors within the ecosystem, and specifically at their own measurement and understanding of value, may create a useful alternative view of the creative industries.

ONS data is deeply embedded in macroeconomic policy such that it is challenging for government to pursue policy without at least understanding where it sits across the ONS measures. Without a clear grounding in ONS data, a policy risks becoming deracinated – with very real consequences, not least of which is the risk of ownership drifting between different departments and zones of governmental interest and responsibility. Where actors within the creative industries and the cultural economy are not straightforwardly convergent with conventional economic models, let alone the collection of evidence about those models, it becomes necessary to provide a path back to the world of ONS data.

Unfortunately the problems do not start and end with efforts to quantify the creative industries. The nomenclature embedded in public debate, national and local government policy, and in the wealth of reports commissioned and offered up around the creative industries, is problematic.

The idea of an identifiable boundary to the creative industries begs the question: What might a non-creative industry look like? Is it a hypothetical business in which no creativity is ever deployed? What might this ghost look like? In what business is creative thinking or imagination never deployed in problem solving? This is a very serious issue because, if it is not possible to ascertain what a non-creative industry is, then this suggests that the use of the term “creative” is in fact an arbitrary descriptor and cannot be relied upon to give a meaningful guide to what the term is intended to encapsulate, or to activity on which policy might effectively act.

Although it seems its use is arbitrary, the term “creative” is also loaded with a rhetorical feel-good factor. Who wants to be opposed to creativity? Nonetheless, the arbitrary nature of the descriptor “creative industries” contributes to their measurement and assessment being fraught, and results in policy standing on shaky foundations.

There is no escaping the question: What should be used to establish functionally useful groupings? What groupings might be useful from a policy point of view in that there is sufficient commonality of intent and practice that a policy might effectively engage with the grouping?

The term “creative industries” now has global currency, utilised by the OECD amongst others. It is a specifically British creation arising from within New Labour in the last century and although it is still a young(ish) idea, it could be argued that it is already a palimpsest on which a whole variety of hopes, dreams, fears and doctrines have been inscribed, obscuring the first marks on the tablet – arguably the creation of the Arts Council under the stewardship of John Maynard Keynes in 1946. In stark contrast to the state colonisation of culture favoured by our recently vanquished Fascist enemies and nascent Cold War opponents of the time, the Arts Council's genesis was based on a strong belief in state support being “hands-off”. Interestingly CEMA, the Arts Council's precursor, also had a particular interest in the applied arts – many of which would fall within current

descriptors of the creative industries.

The much later formalisation of the term “creative industries” was a device to facilitate a hands-on economic intervention – a device that has been less effective than hoped.

So let’s try being unequivocal and perhaps a little heretical: The creative industries do not exist. Coal mining exists, car manufacturing exists – and both once existed in Scotland – but the creative industries are a construct, a frame, a more or less useful viewpoint created and recognised, not by the actors within the ecosystem, but by politicians within a political discourse, and as such the term deserves to be interrogated for utility.

If your stock-in-trade is surprise, serendipity, delight, arousal, being lost in thought, despair, anger, being cool, having a reputation, moral exploration, divinity, immanence, transubstantiation and adrenaline, and if wild knowledge is at the heart of your process, what does your evidence base look like?



# 5

**What does  
evidence evince?**

It is a common and current wisdom that quantitative evidence-based policy-making trumps all others. While the idea that policy should be based on assessment of its intent and likely impact is, of course, common sense, evidence-based decision-making based on quantitative measurement is a specific rhetoric borrowed from medicine wherein the success or failure of an outcome is often unambiguous. It is also perhaps worth noting that it was articulated as an approach transferrable to other fields in the 1980s – the same political moment that saw the idea of the creative industries made explicit as well as Birch's mantra of the importance of high growth companies; all paradigms that have assisted and hindered policy-making in the cultural economy and creative industries ever since.

This paper is not advocating a heretical view that evidence does not matter, but it is reasonable to ask: What does evidence evince? There is no reason why the search for useful paradigms that can be imported from other fields and provide different understandings should not continue.

For example, if culture is easier to imagine or model as a large information system than as an analogue of medical practice, then Carl Hewitt may have something to tell us about the challenges of pinning down the cultural economy within which the arts and some of the creative industries may be considered to sit.

Hewitt is, among other things, Chair of the Stamford-based International Society for *Inconsistency Robustness*. In 2011 he described inconsistency robustness

as “information system performance in the face of continually pervasive inconsistencies”. Hewitt's robust systems are based on (i) an acceptance that large information systems are continually and pervasively inconsistent and there is no way to revise them to attain consistency, (ii) that there are typically several ways to calculate probability and often the result is that the probability is both close to 0% and close to 100%, and (iii) that resolving uncertainty to determine truth is not a realistic goal in large information systems. This marks a shift from a previously dominant paradigm based on inconsistency denial and inconsistency elimination, attempting to sweep inconsistencies under the rug.

Perhaps Hewitt's inconsistency robustness offers one alternate way of understanding these challenging characteristics as a strength of the arts and the creative industries underlying its robustness, potential and opportunity.

If your stock-in-trade is surprise, serendipity, delight, arousal, being lost in thought, despair, anger, being cool, having a reputation, moral exploration, divinity, immanence, transubstantiation and adrenaline, and if wild knowledge is at the heart of your process, what does your evidence base look like? How do you measure the totality of what these actors leave in their wake?

This research project has drawn on multiple methodologies; it began with the qualitative and then looked at quantitative pictures. This qualitative primacy might be considered an anthropological approach.

6

**Thirteen voices**

*Thirteen in-depth interviews were conducted. The interviewees were selected to cover a wide range of both types and scale of business across the Scottish Government's statistical definition of the creative industries, providing a wide-angle snapshot. In two cases, the interviewee was previously known to the interviewer.*

**Alan Pert**

Partner, Northern  
Office of Research  
and Design (NORD)

**Martin Boyce**

Sculptor

**Hilary Grant**

Knitwear designer

**David Thomson**

Founder of  
Ludometrics

**Stewart Henderson**

Founder of Chemikal  
Underground

**Alistair McAuley**

Founding partner,  
Timorous Beasties

**Jamie Byng**

Publisher and  
Managing Director,  
Canongate Publishing

**Kirsteen Stewart**

Fashion and  
Textile designer

**Ziggy Campbell**

Founding member  
of design collective  
and band, Found

**Sophie Kyle**

Proprietor, The Skinny

**Christy Cole**

Partner, Briggs & Cole

**Sheila Fleet**

Jeweller

**Stephen Marshall**

Global Marketing  
Manager, Dewar's

## a. Success

The focus of the interviews, reflecting the brief for this paper, was to uncover what the various practitioners and business people valued in what they did, and how they measured or articulated that value. In addition, a review was undertaken of the recent measures of the scale of the creative industries in Scotland. These can be found in the Interviews Section 9 p.37 and Secondary Research Section 10 p.142. The interview transcripts run in excess of 100 pages as much was voiced. However, some issues repeatedly emerged. This paper is focused on what the actors in the ecosystem think about themselves, their motivations and drivers. There follow some selected quotes.

### Alan Pert

**Alan Pert:** (NORD's) success is in the product of what we do; we build buildings. And if we build buildings that we're happy with and they get peer recognition then that's a way of measuring success. If you continue to get invited to work and you feel as if your practice is growing, that's another, I suppose, element of success.

**Alan Pert:** If you were to look at success as purely commercially driven, you would look at how your company grows in terms of people and in terms of turnover, and that's not been our motivation.

### Martin Boyce

**B.L:** What is the measure of success for you?

**Martin Boyce:** It's all relative. You don't see it when you're in it because there's always something else; you've always got things to do. I guess, partly, it (the measure of success) is the freedom to do what you want to do and work in the way you want to work.

**Martin Boyce:** There is a point when as a young artist you're making art and it is only going into other artists' run spaces or disused spaces that you get a hold of. It's like putting on a gig – you're doing them for your friends or other interested people. But then as you become more successful, the places where the work ends up changes. Most of these places are, by and large, completely public, have a public accessibility to them. I guess also the status of them, of the work, the framework around it is elevated and with that comes an elevation of the work. Yeah, I don't know, maybe I'm now doing stadium tours.

### Hilary Grant

**B.L:** So you have suggested that if you could make a living without anyone wearing your work that's not enough. What you want is not just the financial measure, you want people to enjoy your products?

**Hilary Grant:** Yes.

**B.L:** Is that part of the value for you?

**Hilary Grant:** Mm-hmm, yeah. I definitely enjoy running the business a lot more when I get more sales online rather than getting big wholesale orders, which are great but you don't know how well it's going to sell, you don't know what pieces, you don't get the same feedback. And at the end of the season the pieces might not sell. So yeah, knowing that people want it (is part of the value).

**B.L:** So even when you're not really earning a living from it, there is nonetheless a value in it for you personally because you take a pleasure in people themselves enjoying it?

**Hilary Grant:** Yeah.

**B.L:** And that matters to you?

**Hilary Grant:** It does.

**B.L:** What you're trying to do is make a living out of your creativity. That's what drives you?

**Hilary Grant:** Yeah. Just being able to have that balance between being able to live above the headline and putting my skills to good use...

## David Thomson

**David Thomson:** I guess my aim is to have the company self-sustaining. At the moment most of our money has come through doing work for other people, which isn't scalable. What we need to do is start building out our own revenue streams so that our own products, or own IP, is making money while we sleep.

**B.L:** So if you are hoping to, as I understand it, gradually shift your business model, the measure of the success of that will be a higher level of profitability?

**David Thomson:** Yep.

**B.L:** Is that the sole measure for you? If you had to change what you were bringing to the business to do that, is that a different proposition? There are some companies where, presumably, it's just about making money and if you start doing one thing you would happily drop it and do something totally different until you found something making money. But then thinking about what you said about Ludometrics, that it is a vehicle for you to do what you want to do, it suggests that there's possibly something more complex here. Are there rewards for you, other than the money, that balance it?

**David Thomson:** Yes, I think it's somewhere in between the two. It's not just creation for creation's sake and it's not just purely driven by the money side of it. It's creating the products that I want to see exist in the world because I can't play them at the moment, but in order to bring them into being I need a certain level of freedom – so there's that constant tension.

## Stewart Henderson

**B.L:** If I understand what you're saying, you've had ups and downs rather than some straightforward growth, but the economic point is that you are still here. Still here to do what, though? You're still here to maybe make some money in the future or still here to have that (brand) voice that we talked about?

**Stewart Henderson:** Well they're never mutually exclusive, the finding of that voice or using our voice is never separate from our ability to make money. We must never allow ourselves, as a record label, to become apologists for the idea that we want to make money and be successful. Success would allow us to continue to sustain ourselves and do what we do. I wouldn't want, or ever advocate, that we radically change tack of what we do in order to become successful. Wherever we end up getting to, I'd like to end up getting there with some sort of uniformity of vision.

## Alistair McAuley

**Alistair McAuley:** Success isn't money, isn't always money. You know, 23 years of working within three yards of each other can be quite tense, but we both have the ultimate goal which is not a financial goal, it is just to produce amazing things. The kind of things that make you think: "This is just fantastic." And I think that's what makes a difference. On the face of it, we don't really care if we sell one roll of wallpaper or 50 rolls of wallpaper.

## Jamie Byng

**Jamie Byng:** I suppose I realised one way of measuring success for me was a further enhancement of our independence...and it really happened in a big way with Pi, because suddenly we were sitting on a lot of cash for the first time. We'd been pretty hand to mouth for the first six, seven years. You know, we'd been growing the business slowly but thankfully we had a generous bank. Until we had that hit, we were always in overdraft, certainly it was a bit tense with the gearing on the business, blah, blah, blah. When we suddenly had a lot of money I thought: "Fuck, now we are actually independent for the first time. We are truly independent and now is when we'll start to get way more dangerous and interesting and exciting than when you are hand to mouth just scraping; when you can't plan further ahead, when you can't invest in the projects you'd like to, when you can't buy some of the things you would like to." And that's been one of the huge liberating factors, for me, which is one of the consequences of success that's enabled me to grow the business in ways that I think make it more exciting and, for me, richer as a business, was having financial freedom.

## b. Art and commerce

**Martin Boyce:** My other reference points were somehow more accessible, through interest in music and design and so on; the record shop was your art gallery. These were the things I was tapping into much more, you know, Peter Saville sleeves and The Face magazine and all these kind of things, so you could begin to see, through things that were being visualised there, you could see people who somehow had achieved some degree of notoriety or success, through doing things like playing music or going to clubs or playing records or dressing up. That whole thing really interested me. For me it was all one thing, whether it was art or music or design, it was about entering that world. It was, and still is, a strong music scene, so we would come through, as soon as we could get into clubs or bars, we would come through from Hamilton, just outside of Glasgow, and start to go and see bands and all that stuff.

**B.L:** What you suggest is that that the more commercial parts of the cultural endeavour were also absorbed as R and D for your art practice?

**Martin Boyce:** Yes.

### Kirsteen Stewart

**B.L:** So you started on a kitchen table. Was the goal just an economic one then? Was it: "I want to make and sell more of these things"? Was that your goal?

**Kirsteen Stewart:** It's a lifestyle choice as well. I mean, I chose to come back to Orkney and start my business which some people didn't think would maybe be the best idea. But I wanted to live here. I like travelling but I want my base to be in Orkney. I think that's a different side of it and that's not really measured. Certainly not in terms of accountants, bank managers.

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**Alan Pert:** I think anyone that's doing work of importance has got a particular attitude to the way they do that.

**B.L:** Okay, so why is it important? I imagine from our conversation that in your practice as architect, importance is measured by your peers and the public saying: "This building is of importance." Correct me if I'm wrong but what I think that would mean is that it has some value over and beyond its simple, physical value or dimensions. They're not going to say it's important because it's 10,000 square metres, they're saying it's important because it has some attitude?

**Alan Pert:** Like any business you've got to consider the commercial issues with it. And I think our profession maybe is governed by a lot of commercial constraints. It's not rocket science to know that if you were to sit down with a brief for a building and look at it and say: "Let's work out how many man hours that's going to take. We need to make 25% profit out of that. Right, that's how we're going to do it. We're going to put so-and-so on it and we'll monitor that to make sure we get 25% profit." That's the way a lot of practices work, for understandable reasons. That's not the way we work.

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**B.L:** And so one of the drivers, you just put it in a very interesting way, it's to keep making something that you wanted to be able to play with. So growing a business is also about keeping it where you're making things that you would like to play with?

**David Thomson:** Which I call selfish creativity.

**B.L:** Do your customers value selfish creativity? Do they understand that?

**David Thomson:** I don't think they understand that that's the process behind it, necessarily. I think the way I approach it is that I don't assume that I'm so special and unique that I'm the only person in the world that wants such a thing. So the trick

is then how do you create that awareness in other people that whatever you've made exists. Which is kind of the problem for any creative business and creative product.

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**B.L:** It seems something like Chemikal is clearly generating something that people put a value on beyond the monetary value they're prepared to hand over to you. But is there a connection, because value is an interesting word, there are values that you may have and your team may have, and then we're also talking about value of the work you do. Are those two connected?

**Stewart Henderson:** I'd like to think (so), it comes down to this idea of: Are our decisions as a record label driven by financial imperatives or creative or cultural ones? (It's a) broadly similar but slightly different way of looking at it. Is the value of the label in financial terms different from the value that we have as an organisation? Well, I would hope so, because we're not worth an awful lot financially. So I'd like to think that we're greater than the sum of our financial parts.

**Stewart Henderson:** In the ten years between 2003 and 2013, what had Chemikal Underground done other than sell fewer records? Even though we're selling fewer records in the ten years between 2003 and 2013, what has Chemikal Underground done? We've continued to build a reputation. Not based on how many records we've sold, but on whether it's credible, critical acclaim or whatever. But we have continued to add and contribute to whatever cultural momentum we have as a label.

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**Jamie Byng:** We don't give a shit about our books actually selling lots of copies because that's not the reason we're publishing, but at the same time we're absolutely determined to do as best as we possibly can for our authors and

their books. And that, to me, is the joy of a creative industry, that you are always caught between that thing of kind of, not purity, but integrity of the decision making; the quality of your work combined with the commercial marketplace into which that work has to sit or operate within.

**B.L:** So that paradox is at the heart of the creative industries? Was it F. Scott Fitzgerald that said the sign of real intelligence is the ability to hold onto two opposing ideas at the same time?

**Jamie Byng:** Yeah. I think it is Fitzgerald that said that. It's a great line and I remember hearing that and thinking: "Hang on."

**B.L:** But you're suggesting that actually that paradox is at the heart of energising what you do?

**Jamie Byng:** Yeah, I think it's on that cusp that the real joy and excitement of what we do comes alive.

**B.L:** David Thomson, who has a company called Ludometrics, says he makes digital toys and games which is a nice way of constructing it. I asked him how do you know what's a Ludometrics toy and what isn't? Do you do any kind of conventional market research? And he said: "No, I absolutely don't ask the market because the market doesn't know. How does the market know they're going to want one of my toys until I've invented it?" Which I thought was a very interesting answer.

**Jamie Byng:** And it's very true. Absolutely how I see it with books, whilst of course we are aware of the market and when we have acquisition meetings, we think about books in relation to comparable titles and how might we position it and stuff like that.

**B.L:** The strategic thinking.

**Jamie Byng:** The strategic thinking. We're not publishing for the market, we don't give a fuck about the market. What we care about is the book and whether the book is actually saying something worth

saying and whether we want to spend six hours reading a book. That was always my guiding principal as a DJ, if I wanted to dance to this track or listen to it then I might play it. If I didn't want to listen to it from beginning to end, no fucking chance, I'm not going to play it because I think someone else might like it. We've got to like it. So it's purely passion-driven, it's very personal, everything that comes out of this publishing house is stamped with real personality because it's for personal reasons we're putting it out there.

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**Alistair McAuley:** We certainly can't compete on price with anybody, so that's your option – you either compete on price or you compete on the other value, the anti-value, the whatever you want to call it.

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**Kirsteen Stewart:** There was a big gap in my life where retail completely took over and I've only really just started to get back into the design side...because that's the bit I loved at the start and have been feeling like I've been losing that.

**B.L:** So now we finally arrive at an answer to my first question! Which ultimately is that design is an important driver to you personally. I'm not your bank manager here checking whether you care about business.

**Kirsteen Stewart:** Good. Yeah, that's the passion and the drive.

**B.L:** Do you think that your customers are somehow buying that passion and drive or is it just something that stops with you and your pleasure from it? Or is it related to the business?

**Kirsteen Stewart:** I think that it's related to the business.

**B.L:** It's not something outside the business? You don't go home and have the passion and drive outside the business or the other way round or something?

**Kirsteen Stewart:** I think customers are inspired by it or they enjoy it. They want to buy into it, and for lots of different reasons.



## c. Risk

**Hilary Grant:** There's a few techniques in pieces I want to have made and I have no idea if they would sell and is there a way of getting round these problems so I can have, I guess, the satisfaction of having the piece made and designing it and trying out the sampling without having such a big financial risk?

**B.L:** So at the moment you're funding the development yourself by not taking a wage. Do you see yourself as taking a risk?

**Hilary Grant:** I don't know. In some ways I feel like having the business is a risk. I don't know if this will sound silly, but when you see other people like my peers or people the same age as me who have got past that stage in other fields, where they're not just on entry level wages but they're starting to get in to substantial salaries, and I'm thinking: "I'm way behind that." Will I get to the stage of thinking "How far will I go?". Will I get the same satisfaction from it, or is there going to be a point I realise it's not enough and I may want to have the same basic securities as other people? Will I get to the point where I'm feeling a bit behind in life? It's not something I desire just now, but if I wanted to have children that would be extremely difficult without more economic security.

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**Alan Pert:** I don't think (commercially driven success) is the way most creative companies work, creativity is at the core of their business. They sit down and work out what's the best. Yes, you run a business you've got to think about money, got to think of the finances, but you don't sit down there and think: "Right, what's the cheapest way of delivering this project?" It's also one of the difficulties; how do you balance that with commercial realities of the business?

**B.L:** It probably makes you a riskier proposition as a business, I suppose, doesn't it?

**Alan Pert:** Yeah.

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**Alan Pert:** The risk taking, I think, that's an important one. There's projects we do that don't make money. We make that decision, that's going to be a financial loss to the company. If we had an accountant sitting beside me we'd be a different business.

**Alan Pert:** I think this risk is a fascinating subject. Risk, from my point of view, is becoming something that is dominating certain businesses. Certainly in procurement.

**B.L:** Taking risk or avoiding risk?

**Alan Pert:** Avoiding risk. I think risk avoidance, especially given what's happened with the financial downturn, coming out of that, risk avoidance is everything, for obvious reasons, but the impact it's having on creative businesses like ours is quite considerable. And I think it's a really serious issue that has to be confronted by government. Procurement is killing off a lot of creative endeavour that needs some nurturing. How do you say to a young business that's starting out: "We'll nurture you"? How do you do that?

**B.L:** It is interesting that you talk about risk in the context of nurturing because somehow or other that has to be about risk and about facilitating risk. As you say, it can't be about avoiding risk. From what you're saying, policy that's avoiding risk is killing things. That's probably an unusual idea from a policy perspective: "We want to have a policy that increases risk."

**B.L:** Is there a connection between risk and opportunity, from your point of view? Do you have to take risks to generate the opportunity to do work that's important or got an attitude or whatever?

**Alan Pert:** I think risk taking is everything in creative work.

**Alan Pert:** I'm not someone who used to sit down and try and work out a five-year plan. Never really been in that position where I've had a big strategy. I've always taken each project as it comes: "Right, I want to make the best building out of this." That in itself will promote the business and we'll grow. Each project is what we'll deliver. It's still an attitude we have, but with Melbourne coming up it made me really evaluate what I was doing because if I step out of the day-to-day Glasgow business how does that impact on clients? How do they perceive the building? Do they perceive it as me or do they perceive it as a name? And how does that affect staff and how does that affect current jobs and everything else? And I started looking at us as a company and how did we get where we are? Looking back over that ten-year period, it has been about taking risks. I'm convinced that that's the core. We have a particular attitude to design discussions, but risk taking, I think, is key.

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**David Thomson:** In the creative industries in general, that (rollercoaster) seems to be a way of life. You have highs and you have lows and it's how you deal with them and come back again.

**B.L:** And what do you think it is that allows you to come back? What is it that makes you try and come back? Surely a lot of people on some more conventional trajectory, they wouldn't try, they would say: "Enough is enough."

**David Thomson:** Yeah, probably a combination of "I don't really know how to do anything else..."

**B.L:** Is that true or are you not prepared to do anything else?

**David Thomson:** Probably not. It's probably a bit of both.

## d. Wild knowledge

**Stewart Henderson:** I consider myself to be fairly culturally curious.

**B.L:** When you first started out, was Chemikal Underground something that was culturally attuned, even if it was pop culture?

**Stewart Henderson:** Yeah, I think it would have had to have been.

**B.L:** Why would it have to have been?

**Stewart Henderson:** You take decisions, especially when you're younger, the decisions that we came to create Chemikal Underground, to set off on this path, establishing this record label, wasn't borne out of any kind of entrepreneurial vigour, it was a cultural vigour. Cultural curiosity again, or a cultural recklessness.

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**B.L:** Is wild knowledge a term you've used before?

**Martin Boyce:** I don't even know if I interpret it correctly, but the French artist Pierre Huyghe talked about it, how artists think. It's not a lineage of thought or research that is put in place by the academy, it's not a canon. It's a "look, that's amazing," and then it leads to something else and leads to something else; it's an accumulation of things that just fascinate you. And then somehow get filtered through you and come out. You are drawing on these things not through focused research but through distraction and accidental happenstance.

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**Alan Pert:** We came out with...a sense of experimentation, risk taking. Part of it was naivety; we didn't really understand the legalities of "if you get this wrong you could get sued".

**B.L:** So that allowed you to...

**Alan Pert:** ...that allowed us to do things. If you knew everything, the things we know now, I mean, I look back and think some of our best work was some of the things we did on a "look, let's just do it". And I think that's the thing that quickly established us with a reputation: "Look, they're doing things." I mean, people would call it innovation. It was literally we were thinking: "Why not? Let's try this."

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**Jamie Byng:** But this in a different kind of way is seeing me satisfy that desire to regard Canongate and publishing as not just about the printed book but about a way in which you can channel and share ideas and expressions of all sorts of knowledge through the widest prism of forms that you can.

**B.L:** Have you heard of this term "wild knowledge"?

**Jamie Byng:** No, but I immediately like it. Wild knowledge seems like a really good kind of knowledge.

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### Ziggy Campbell

**Ziggy Campbell:** Even when we were at art school, we were trying to turn our art degrees into music degrees. Trying to get music into the work as much as possible.

**B.L:** There's a long British tradition of art school being the best place to develop bands.

**Ziggy Campbell:** Totally.

**B.L:** There's that poem called The Art School Dance Goes On Forever. You're saying your successful strategy started with wilfully misusing your education?

**Ziggy Campbell:** Yeah, absolutely.

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**Ziggy Campbell:** I've never done any formal training in anything, but we've had

to learn on the hoof, on the fly the whole time whenever we do projects. Because they're quite technology-driven. I don't know fucking anything about electronics but I constantly find myself sitting soldering trying to figure out voltage drops and all that.

**B.L:** So you learn on the hoof?

**Ziggy Campbell:** Yeah, totally. Because you've got an idea. You know it's doable.

**B.L:** How do you know it's doable?

**Ziggy Campbell:** Because it is. They always are. They're always doable. You come up with the most crazy idea you can – don't be limited – and then you figure out how to do it. Every time, that's how we've done it. You think you've come up with a great idea and you go out and you're like: "Nah, look, somebody's done it kind of there, let's take that little bit of the recipe."

**B.L:** Tools to be found somewhere?

**Ziggy Campbell:** Yeah. And I think that's massively a part of the creative process now. I think that's what people do. They just go out, it's that kind of hack-sensibility. Take bits here and there and put it together until you've made things you want. It's like plunder-phonics.

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### Sophie Kyle

**B.L:** So you, and presumably your team, can understand these different measures. It sounds to me that some of them are very difficult to formally measure, they sound like intuitive measures?

## e. Attitude and influence

**Sophie Kyle:** We do actually have a couple of lists of successes and you can count them. But predicting them is the intuition, the intuitive part. And that's the creative part, I think. It's about understanding people, it's about understanding their work on both sides, the work that they produce for The Skinny and the work that they produce themselves as artists, and it's about The Skinny's team being able to recognise...X factor, but not The X Factor. Because that show has changed that phrase forever.

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**Kirsteen Stewart:** For me, it's really about surface design. So I'm always looking for patterns, it can be anywhere, even manhole covers. I seem a bit obsessed with them at the moment. I can see it as a surface design, a repeat print or a placement print. I can measure it on how happy it makes me...because I feel motivated, inspired. If I see something I really like, it fires me up, I guess.

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### Christy Cole

**Christy Cole:** For a scientific analogy, of the nucleus with the atoms, the molecules become unstable, there's breakages but that kind of slippage of motion becomes something that generates a new idea. Some become redundant but some, there's something there that's got an untapped energy.

**B.L:** A casual reading of The Skinny would suggest that there's an element of rebelliousness across the content?

**Sophie Kyle:** Yeah, I think that's right.

**B.L:** Political with a small p.

**Sophie Kyle:** Yeah.

**B.L:** So that's not an accident?

**Sophie Kyle:** No.

**B.L:** That's part of your brand?

**Sophie Kyle:** Definitely, yeah. That's actually in the brand's description; rebellion, rebellious.

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**B.L:** There must be a pleasure, I mean, there's a reason why you do it.

**Stewart Henderson:** Yeah.

**B.L:** You may have forgotten it, but believe you me, somewhere there's a reason why you did it.

**Stewart Henderson:** Somewhere. I'll reacquaint myself with it at some point down the line, I'm sure. It's not a million miles away from Jamie in the sense that there's lots of things that I get vicarious satisfaction from. You know, there's the selfless and the selfish element of it. The selfish element of having other people think that what I thought was good is really good and I suppose that idea of people thinking: "Those guys have got great taste." But there's also the more selfless aspect of it of being able, in some way, to contribute to helping a band who I believe are great to get on and realise, without being too Oprah Winfrey about this, to get on and realise in as many ways as we're able to help them realise their dream of being able to go into a studio and make an album.

**B.L:** A company in some other industry altogether at your level of turnover would be extremely unlikely to have global influence. And it becomes clear

that actually among all these micro-businesses in the creative industries, they have a disproportionately big global voice which is perhaps part of that collective capital that they're delivering. That's what I'm finding myself thinking.

**Stewart Henderson:** I think I would be wary in terms of what our international or global influence would be necessarily but one of the things, and I'm sure it's not unique to music...and what music in particular is good for is that it has an extraordinary reach beyond the purchase of specific units, way beyond that. It's the drop-the-pebble-in-the-water kind of thing. You can reach every nook and cranny through the most unlikely of chain reactions, if you like. I think what we have, if it's not global influence, which I don't think it is, but I think what we do have is familiarity, brand awareness within very focused, localised demographics of people. But we have a wide reach in that respect. And that has a view as well, and it's an asset for us to have that because these things can come in handy when you least expect it.

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**Jamie Byng:** What really drives me, I suppose, is a love of stories and a love of what one person's view can do to another person's view.

**B.L:** So if you really boiled it down then, it's about influence, isn't it?

**Jamie Byng:** Yeah, shaping someone else's sense of the world. And my sense of the world is being transformed by hundreds and thousands of different writers and artists and musicians in ways I can only kind of be grateful for and delighted about. That sense of recognising there is no self, you are simply a construct of experiences and therefore the more different experiences that you can have and the more good experiences you have, the more enlightened ways of seeing the world you can have. And as a publishing house, that is what your responsibility is; to gather as many of those different ways of seeing the world, and they can be contradictory.

## f. Buying time, taking freedom

**Jamie Byng:** I was talking to Martin, he's this guy that's been working with us as editor and we've got this lovely Walt Whitman quote: "Do I contradict myself? Very well then, I am enormous, I contain multitudes." We put it on the catalogue about ten years ago and I always loved that idea of contradiction and of containing multitudes. We all contain multitudes and I think it's a question of kind of enriching the things that are going into people's heads.

**B.L:** Yeah, and influence is sort of a wrong, because influence carries with it some sense of...

**Jamie Byng:** Control, or...

**B.L:** Control. It's not about that, but that is what's reflected back to you, though. The reflection back is that you have impacted people.

**Jamie Byng:** Yeah, you've nourished them and you've fed them in ways.

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**Martin Boyce:** It would be very interesting to feel that the work goes out there and then becomes part of something else; it develops. Because that's how I work, it's how we all work. You see things you're influenced by.

**Martin Boyce:** It was never an overnight thing but economically when you can run the studio and have a business and support your family; when you get to the point that you can have the space you need, have the help that you need, buy the books that you need, can go and make the trips that you need to do research and pursue the things that interest you, that's a phenomenal kind of freedom that then goes into the work; it all goes into the work.

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**B.L:** So when you think up an idea, how does that happen?

**Hilary Grant:** Just a combination of things. I don't really switch off from seeing things or noticing things, whether interesting or beautiful, and it's difficult to do that up here anyway. You couldn't if you wanted to. But generally I'll do research that feels really conscious, like go to the library and look through books on traditional techniques or go to galleries, museums and look at ancient crafts or architectural structures. It's really hard to pinpoint. Sometimes you're just sitting in bed and feel like you have an idea and I just have to write it down before I forget the next morning or draw the pattern.

**B.L:** When that happens, do you have a customer in mind?

**Hilary Grant:** No.

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**David Thomson:** A game that had 50,000 sales would probably be pretty good for the business, provide quite a long cash cliff.

**B.L:** What do you mean by that?

**David Thomson:** How much ground do we have (in front of us) before we fall off?

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**Alan Pert:** Berlin was a place where you weren't aware of any particular policies, you weren't aware of any particular manifesto. There was a generation of people at a particular age doing things and finding a way, a creative output, whether it was through music, dance, whatever, there was a celebration of creativity going on. And one thing was working off another; architects were working off graphic designers, graphic designers were working off musicians and film-makers. It was a city that was going through change that was allowing that to happen. People were exploiting the fact that policy and legislation hadn't really caught up because it was a city that was still trying to find its identity. Ownership of buildings, ownership of space, was still a bit muddled, so it was a place that lacked a lot of particular regulations. It was quite a unique thing, but I think a place going through change like that can facilitate a lot and allow things to happen.

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**Ziggy Campbell:** It's interesting that the only people that can give us any money are, okay not wealthy individuals, but wealthy companies. I mean, Chemikal have no budget to facilitate some of our crazier ideas.

**B.L:** So when they're being patrons, do you think that they actually see themselves in that role?

**Ziggy Campbell:** I think they probably do, yeah. I think they probably do.

**B.L:** So do they give you freedom?

**Ziggy Campbell:** Very much so. I'm not squeamish about it at all. I think it's a different world now, and I think if they're willing to support my company then I'm totally happy to go along with it. As long as I don't end up doing something I don't want to do.

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**B.L:** We talked earlier about what ten years on might look like. In essence you've said it's a point where you can draw a comfortable living and have enough assistants that you could continue creating new things rather than just handle the business. I think that's what you said it would look like.

**Hilary Grant:** Yeah, I think having more time, more balance. I do enjoy the business side and I do enjoy working out strategy but I suppose there's always smaller parts of it that take up time you could be using creatively.

Culture is everywhere; it is a secular immanence. The arts are one engine of production of this culture, the creative industries are another – differentiated by their relationships with their audiences and markets and, crucially, their varying intent.

7

**Common ground within  
a cultural economy**

Culture is everywhere; it is a secular immanence. The arts are one engine of production of this culture, the creative industries are another – differentiated by their relationships with their audiences and markets and, crucially, their varying intent. This cultural economy encompasses a great deal of industrious activity, including the application of a wide variety of business models from individual artist to publicly listed corporations, and investment from sweat equity to subsidy to complex tax planning.

Within this cultural economy, the arts are intuitively understood to determine their relationship with an audience in terms of art for art's sake, a value system that is broadly unquestioned in liberal democracies and has been recently reasserted in the Scottish context by Fiona Hyslop, Cabinet Secretary. For the purposes of this paper, this understanding of the arts is not challenged. Although these arts activities are included in the Scottish Government's allocation of SIC codes to the creative industries, arts for art's sake and the economic activity within that realm are not the focus of this paper, although they do fall within what this paper proposes as the cultural economy.

Our interviews reveal a strong commonality of intent across a wide range of practices, aspirations and business models within a subsector of the creative industries.

A difference between these business and more conventional commercial endeavours is that the whole of a person or proprietor's value system and life is engaged or invested in the business, whereas in an ordinary business it is only a part. It is this that gives rise to the dismissive term "lifestyle business" – but is also what may be an essential precondition of work in the creative businesses.

As can be seen from the sample interviews, the values are intrinsic to the working models and, crucially, although the economic driver is given precedence over art for art's sake there is a consistent tendency for the values to place limits on what might be done to generate an economic return.

I interviewed Stephen Marshall, Global Marketing Manager for Dewar's whisky, because he cropped up in a number of other interviewees' trajectories. Dewar's place value on their investment in a very sophisticated way, identifying emotional value and credibility in a matrix that cannot be directly enumerated, but which has a long-term value to the brand.

Policy needs to find a way of thinking through and identifying this intangible value that the commercial world seems already able to do.

The embedding of lifestyles in their businesses, their pursuit of complex intangible values, the business risks involved in creative thinking, and the limits placed on business activity by intangible values are all intrinsic to the success of these business. While, from a conventional business standpoint, these factors may be unappealing, they are in fact a collective capital that substantial parts of the creative industries both contribute to and freely draw down on.

Clearly not all the Scottish Government, DCMS or OECD understanding of the creative industries fits within what could be considered a cultural economy. Those parts of the ecosystem actively contributing to and drawing down from the collective capital of intangible values in the way this paper outlines, and that is reflected in the interviews, do fit within a cultural economy.

The good news is that taking our approach at looking at what drives the actors in the ecosystem, at their practice and aspirations, it is possible to arrive at a grouping of activities that, although not exactly coincident with any existing national or supra national definition of the creative industries, does have sufficient congruence such that current thinking, policy and mapping of organisational responsibility may be only partially adrift. So the baby does not have to be thrown out with the bathwater.

Further good news lies in the policy gain there could be from driving out the incoherent workarounds involved in failing to critique the creative industries and arts nomenclature and taxonomy thoroughly. This clarity need not cost money.

Of course the subsector of the Government-defined creative industries, those that are not art for art's sake but are nonetheless contributing to and drawing down from a collective capital of intangible values in the manner of our interviewees, commonly also rely on other businesses falling within government creative industries definitions for manufacture and distribution, which for the purposes of this paper would be excluded from the cultural economy.

It is worth noting that the previous geographical and attendant social connections and shared values between creator, mass manufacture and distribution had already been broken by globalised extended physical supply chains. This break has only extended in the digital age, arguably serving to emphasise the need for the use of intent, as opposed to external measures, to identify common ground for policy that can operate at a national or regional level.

The driver of exclusion or inclusion proposed herein is not hierarchical, but rather is intended to determine groupings or zones within the ecosystem whose commonality of intent, if not of practice, means that a given policy might effectively engage with them.

How can we predict a commercial entity that contributes to the collective capital of intangibles from within its place in a Standard Industrial Classification of All Economic Activities? Are there markers that can help map a zone of the ecosystem as opposed to in-depth assessments of individual entities?

Many of the creative industries produce meta products; products whose value lies in what they say about something other than the product itself.

The production of a feature film, although an enormous logistical exercise often involving interim steps drawing on extensive physical construction and large scale deployment of labour, cannot be fully or accurately valued by measuring such production activity. Nor does the value lie in the physical media. Whether a hard drive, celluloid or other repository of data, it lies instead in the effect the film has on an audience; in the meaning that is constructed when the film is experienced.



In this sense, unlike say, white goods for the kitchen, a film is an example of a meta product whose value both commercial and intangible lies outwith its physical presence or functionality. Not all the activities or actors currently commonly included in definitions of the creative industries generate meta products.

An individual, enterprise or other organisation making or generating meta products is likely to be one operating within the cultural economy and contributing to, and drawing down on, the collective capital of intangibles. Even though the intent is to monetise the product according to a commercial driver, and presumably to change it until it meets with market success, the meta product's value to the consumer as well as the creator lies in its ability to carry intangible value in the form of emotional content, and/or the intentional production of pleasure. Amongst others, film development and production, television development and production, fiction book publishing, recorded music production and performance-based businesses are all makers of meta products, and in so doing are contributing to and drawing down from a collective capital of intangibles.

Where the product or outcome is more tangible or pragmatic than the meta products proposed above – for example the design and production of a chair – then some chair-like outcomes have other value and values inscribed within them. A strong indicator of the presence of these “other” values being the steep price differential between a mass-produced utilitarian chair available at an out-of-town store and a bespoke one-off chair that might well cost many thousands of per cent more, despite having only the same pragmatic capacity to seat one. I like to think of this as the item's haecceity, which translates loosely as “thisness”, a term first coined by Duns Scotus circa 1300 and recently re-invigorated in other contexts by cultural theorists Deleuze and Guattari among others. Haecceity denotes the discrete qualities, properties or characteristics of a thing which make it a particular thing. Haecceity is a person or object's

“thisness”; its individualising difference. In a sense it is that which makes it indivisible, it is the intangible reason why a copy is not the same. (Given the Scottish context of this paper, it is serendipitous that Duns Scotus was himself a Scot.)

A chair made by an artist and exhibited in a gallery might have no functional utility, it may not ever be sat on or be capable of being sat on, but it has enough outward signs of being a chair to be about the idea of a chair; it might commonly be considered to be an art object, to be a part of the arts. A chair designed and made by a bespoke furniture designer must first of all deliver the capability of being sat on, otherwise from a customer perspective it is not a chair, yet the customer is in all likelihood paying a substantial premium for the chair. In part, such a premium price will cover objective costs of design, manufacture and materials, but in part the price reflects the added value the creator has imbued the chair with – its individualising content, its haecceity; value that ripples out beyond the chair's capacity for being sat upon and also beyond the reach of those who sit on it.

This latter chair, while made for the purpose of achieving a commercial transaction, nonetheless has much in common with a meta product such as a film; it trades in and is priced upon intangibles. In this case, the chair maker is likely to have more in common in terms of intent with a film maker than a mass manufacturer of furniture. They are a part of the subset of the creative industries, along with makers of meta products who this paper argues fall within a shared eco-zone, the cultural economy.

Haecceity is not itself an on/off, either/or binary determinant of inclusion or exclusion from the cultural economy, but its presence or intensity is a clue.

In short, if the goal of an individual practitioner or business entity is the production of meta products or the creation of objects or artefacts whose value lies in their haecceity as much as their functionality, then, no matter how these practitioners or businesses monetise their activity they are likely to have other characteristics, challenges and opportunities in common.

*The creative industries are a political construct. As such, although the construct may have had a political value in the past, there is no reason why it should not be subject to review.*

# 8

**Policy challenges  
and opportunities**

**Policy-making would benefit from a realignment of thinking about and around the creative industries before further initiatives are designed or implemented.**

The creative industries are a political construct. As such, although the construct may have had a political value in the past, there is no reason why it should not be subject to review. The term “creative industries”, as enshrined in European and Scottish policy and OECD analysis, is a construction imposed from outwith those constituent elements and enterprises it seeks to treat as a subject. As a damaging consequence, it is often disconnected from any understanding of the intent of those it seeks to describe or contain. There is every possibility that harmonising the structure and actions of arm’s length and other policy-based institutions around an envelope of activity defined by the term “creative industries” as currently widely understood may be exactly the wrong thing to do, entrenching friction “noise” and waste in policy-making and implementation. Furthermore, the current drift towards targeting educational endeavour towards a future shaped by the creative industries catch-all may be dangerously undermining the best of creative education and the quality of creative skills evinced by graduates, entrenching the wasteful noise created by current definitions for a further generation.

This noise wastes the sector’s time (perhaps its most valuable resource) and can distort the prospects of success. For obvious reasons, it is difficult to measure on record but anecdotal evidence also suggests that many officials working within current state and arm’s length organisations charged with impacting the creative industries invest a significant amount of their working time in navigating around the mismatch between their remits and actual activity on the ground.

There are consistent business characteristics, routes to sustainability and success and common intentions and constructions of value across a number of diverse economic activities encompassed within the Scottish Government and OECD definitions of creative industries. However these common grounds are not

to be found across the whole statistical definition of the creative industries used by government in Scotland, or those elsewhere who adopt the OECD’s use of the term.

That subset of actors within the creative industries where the commonality of intent and construction of value this paper identifies can be found is economically driven, generally nimble and dynamic, and also often successful. However, their intent also means they contribute to what we have called in this paper collective capital; a fund of intangible values and intellectual assets within the public domain that informs their lives both within and without the businesses; a capital fund of intangibles they both draw down for use in their creative businesses and contribute to. These businesses differ from those pursuing only more narrowly measurable economic goals, although they are not necessarily any less successful economically.

In contributing to collective capital and a fund of intangibles, the businesses are also contributing or sharing their values with wider society. Many of these businesses operate within what would have been considered popular culture in previous analytical frameworks.

The Scottish Government chose to include most of the economic value of the arts in its definition of creative industries. The subset of intent and practice, the business group identified in this paper, shares some characteristics with those operating within the arts world, notwithstanding the differing economic dimension of their intent and the different priority they accord monetising their activities. We call this broad church the cultural economy.

Those constituents of the current creative industries definition that would fall outwith this cultural economy are, of course, no less economically important for doing so. The point of their proposed exclusion is that their operating model and intent is such that the same policies will not benefit them efficiently. Those excluded remain important to those included – commonly they are part of the manufacturing and distribution

infrastructure required for all to operate. As one would expect in a globalised economy of extended supply chains, they are also therefore commonly organised at UK or supranational levels rather than the Scottish or regional level, with the exception of craft-based manufacturing, which is closely bound to Scotland and also to the collective capital referred to elsewhere in this paper.

We have proposed two markers that can be used to distinguish those businesses likely to share a commonality of intent and character – meta products and intense haecceity. In straightforward terms, such enterprises foreground intangible values in their practice, valuation and commercial activity and thus contribute to and draw down from the collective intangible capital this paper understands as a marker of a cultural economy. The critical discourse in the public sphere around their output is often a further clear marker of their investment in, and generation of, intangible values.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to arrive at a definitive remapping of SIC codes to this new sub-group on which policy might effectively operate. However, this paper has proposed a possible basis for such an exercise. It is the case that policy that is disconnected from quantitative measure is, in the contemporary political environment, liable to get lost and become deracinated, so re-mapping has value. Using the markers discussed in this paper to sort activity at the most granular level the raw statistical data permits could contribute to a re-mapping.

Our research, and numerous other recent papers, suggest very strongly that micro-business forms a very substantial unmeasured activity across the creative industries as currently defined, and particularly so within the subset this paper proposes to identify as the cultural economy.

Just as dark matter is postulated to be the greater part of matter in the universe, there appears to be a very substantial quantum of economic activity within the cultural economy that is not measured. Much of this activity falls outwith the VAT registration threshold in the UK and/or is

generated by constantly changing short-life entities or networks of individuals working together outside conventional business patterns and trajectories.

Inge Sørensen reviewed a number of existing papers and surveys for the purpose of our research (Inge's Secondary Research follows in Section 10, p.142) and it is notable that, almost without exception, each such paper adopted ad hoc amendments, additions or exclusions to the established definition of creative industries and its relationship to existing statistics. This pattern reinforces the case for the adoption of a more accurate and meaningful map. Such a new map should be insulated from more or less arbitrary attempts to maximise the numerical scale of any given sector or sub-sector and must take account of intent.

This paper has identified the way in which intangible values are deeply embedded in some areas of economic activity. These intangibles are not susceptible to quantitative measurement and to some degree they are discussed, promoted, sold and expressed in a way that intentionally resists codification and measurement and that is recondite – the essence of something being “cool”. Yet as the intangibles are central to both the intent, the output and, often, the market value of the kind of enterprises this paper looks at, any policy that does not find a way of effectively foregrounding and engaging with these intangibles is, no matter what its quantitative evidence base, flying blind. In short, mechanisms have to be looked at that import and allow for judgement and intuition to play a substantive role in decision-making processes and assessment of outcomes.

In practice, this may mean decision-making processes for the award of benefits of policy initiatives involve extensive external peer input and assessment of external critical validation and influence, both to be combined with humility on the part of those professionals running organisations and institutions implementing policy.

If intangibles are key, then it also needs to be recognised that the provision of resources from public funds in whatever form – logistical support, infrastructure, financial support or meta investment such as advice, provision of information

etc – needs to be structured in such a way that it enhances the capacity for creative thinking, and that it supports the assertion of freedom by the recipients of the investment if it is not to be wasted, self-defeating or worse, destructive of potential. The assertion and utilisation of freedom in this context is analogous to, but not the same as, conventional business risk, R&D and “blue sky thinking” and is widely identified by our interviewees as intrinsic to their delivery of intangible value and economic success. Assessment of prospective intangible values in terms of instrumentalised socio-political goals, as is increasingly common and which could be considered, for example, to be a part of Creative Scotland's practice, may not ensure best value for money in terms of encouraging and facilitating this R&D. The notion of collective capital proposed in this paper might offer the basis of an alternate and more productive frame.

Policy exists not as bricks and mortar but as language. Policy makers must understand that when dealing with a sector for whom both intent and outcome are heavily freighted with intangibles, language is of especial importance. In this context, the very nomenclature and rhetoric around the creative industries is often remarkably disconnected from the intent of those whom it seeks to describe.

This paper has argued that the creative industries do not exist as a definable phenomenon in the sense that it is almost impossible to define what a non-creative industry is or what a destructive industry might look like. Nonetheless, the moment of imagination is key to the entrepreneurs we talked to. It is not a discrete process tied to milestones – it is a fundamental thread of their business practice and often the proprietor's life. The dismissive rhetoric that identifies some in the cultural economy as “lifestyle businesses” is perhaps entirely wrong-headed, obscuring a key characteristic and strength. Our interviewees, although sometimes using alternate language, constantly linked the moment of imagination to the importance of freedom, of curiosity and exploration – R&D if you will. As others have pointed out, freedom is hard work.

Those entrepreneurs drawn from within the creative industries and

operating within the cultural economy are often assumed to be held back by a lack of funding; to struggle to access those tools more easily accessible to other business sectors. This latter thought is true. They frequently are explicitly averse to the exit strategies required by most equity investors, usually for very good reasons given the drivers and dynamics of their businesses. They have non-linear economic trajectories, making them score erratically or poorly on common credit assessments. Their needs are frequently for skills and talent, most especially the actor's own time, rather than for financeable asset capital costs and so on and so forth. They also commonly seek out risk. What our interviews demonstrate is that these business characteristics are also intrinsically linked to the positives that generate both economic value for the businesses and their contribution to collective capital.

However, this inability to access these forms of finance does not in itself suggest that this is an unmet need, and we have not found evidence of that unmet need on a wide-scale, well-argued basis. Indeed, many businesses embrace a policy of bootstrapping their business with gusto.

Listening to our interview sample, a common need emerges – the need to sustain their ability to take risks. For most of us, this would be a path we would fear to tread. However, it does suggest a major opportunity for government to make a difference. Government can place a value on the collective capital generated by the risks these practitioners and businesses take; risks which in generating a free-to-use collective capital, benefit not only their peers acting within the cultural economy, but also wider society. This may mean that more effective policy programs for these albeit commercial practitioners and businesses would look more like arts funding or patronage. It may be a heretical thought, but these ‘softer’ models that do not attempt to ape business models from outwith the cultural economy may be a route to a more cost efficient and responsible use of taxpayers' funds. Could some of the understandings and analyses in this paper be a part of holding such funding models and recipients to account, both individually and across sector groupings?



**Interviews**

# Interview 1

Alan Pert

**Conversation between Bob Last and Alan Pert, one of the founders of Northern Office of Research and Design (NORD) at South Block, Glasgow**

04/07/2013

**A:** I'm director of NORD Architecture and also academically speaking, I'm director of the Melbourne School of Design.

**B:** That's Melbourne as in the other side of the globe?

**A:** Yes, hence I'm only back (in Scotland) for a couple of weeks just now. I was professor of architecture at the University of Strathclyde for about five, six years.

**B:** You're talking to somebody who is currently on their thirty-fifth year out from an architecture course at Edinburgh University, after doing the first three years.

**A:** I used to, on a fractional post, look after the architecture course up at Strathclyde. There were two of us sharing a professorship. One was more about teaching, one was more about research. I took the research role on. The practice name NORD is Northern Office for Research and Design. I got invited out to Melbourne a couple of years ago, then they offered me a visiting professorship and then they asked me if I'd be interested in taking on the director's role at the school of design for a few years. It is fairly complicated, but it's an opportunity to expand the practice as well.

**B:** I'm going to ask you various things in order to understand a bit more about the practice, but first of all I'm interested to know is NORD successful?

**A:** It depends how you categorise success. Successful from a financial point of view, or successful as a...?

**B:** Well, before you answer the question, as you say, it depends on how you categorise success. What I'm interested in is, is it successful according to whatever your choice of category would be?

**A:** Yeah, it's successful, but it's a victim of its own success as well.

**B:** I understand it's not comfortable to be asked to announce that you're successful, but in what sense is it successful, from your point of view?

**A:** From my point of view, its success is in the product of what we do; we build buildings and if we build buildings that we're happy with, and they get peer recognition, then that's a way of measuring success. If you continue to get invited to work and you feel as if your practice is growing, that's another, I suppose, element of success. We've probably got a particular reputation for the work we do.

**B:** Which includes this building, is that right?

**A:** Yeah. If you were to go London and talk to people down there, strangely we've probably got a bigger profile down there than we have up here.

**B:** Why would that be?

**A:** We won Young Practice of the Year 2006. Which was the first time it ever went to a Scottish practice.

**B:** Can I ask you, in 2006, how old you were?

**A:** I'm forty-one just now. So 2006 what was I, I was thirty-four?

**B:** So was it a young practice, or young people leading the practice?

**A:** Young people. Young practice. NORD was ten years old in 2012. It was our ten-year anniversary last year. Young Architect of the Year was for practices with at least one director under forty, our whole practice was under forty. 2006/2007 was a fairly significant time for us because a lot of Scottish practices have really found it difficult to compete outside Scotland – certainly in the London marketplace. We were quite lucky that we broke into that scene when we did. I

think it was a combination of things; yes, I'd like to think it was to do with the work, the quality of the work we were doing, but I also think we were in the right place at the right time, people were starting to get a bit bored with the London practices and there was suddenly a bit of curiosity about what was going on elsewhere.

**B:** Sorry to interrupt your flow. I think I know what you mean by a scene, but some of the people that I'm hoping to reflect back some of this thinking to might not be clear what you mean in this context. What do you mean a scene? What is that?

**A:** The culture of London is a place for creativity. Where I grew up professionally all the best students would usually leave Glasgow in their fourth year and go to London because they felt as if they had to go down there to finish and be recognised by one of two or three institutions. To get a job in certain companies they had to say, "I finished at such-and-such a place" and we really suffered from that. Certainly people within my years of study had that kind of attitude, which frustrated me. And what happened was: early nineties, big recession, no work, I came out with my Honours after fourth year, supposed to do a year of practical experience and ended up in Berlin. Enough money to last a few months, I ended up staying for three years. And over that three year period I suddenly realised that London wasn't the place we needed. There was about ten of us in Berlin and eight of us decided we were all going to go to the Bartlett (University College London). I felt that the fact they were all wanting to do that, I would make a different choice and go back to Glasgow, so I came back here in '93, '94 and did my Masters and set up a practice with a tutor of mine and we won the Tramway commission. That was a competition that we won just as I came out (of college) and that set me off on a career path because to win that job just literally a couple of months after graduating, that suddenly made me realise I'd done the right thing. In London at that point in time, you're getting young practices coming out and just getting established,



folk set themselves out in practice, a lot of them maybe have financial backing from wherever, whether it's wealthy parents, they're not necessarily needing to earn to survive. And you were finding that that was happening every year, there were suddenly new kids on the block and they were given a bar or a restaurant, whatever small scale project to get them going, it was becoming a real hotbed of competition. What I was realising at that point was there was the City of Architecture and Design '99, Year of Culture, there was a number of things going on up here, culturally, that were starting to allow younger practices to develop and Tramway was part of that. I think it was a period of time, the 1990s, from '95 onwards. You're involved in the music scene, musically, Glasgow was going through a particular phase – I think places like in '89 the Sub Club started. Even although Manchester had a massive impact on things, up here you were starting to see a city really transforming, people were starting new clubs, folk were starting to see that you could stay here and do things.

**B:** So coming back to this idea of a 'scene'; it is a shorthand that many people I've talked to, as part of this work, use. It is interesting to try to map what makes a 'scene' because from what you're saying, the sense of a scene is an important part of the world which allowed your business to flourish?

**A:** Absolutely.

**B:** So is it cultural provision, the ability to go to opera and a symphony, or is it a club? Or what is it? What do you mean? What's a scene?

**A:** As I say, what I think happened at that time in Glasgow was that there was a generation of people who suddenly felt comfortable (in themselves). Looking around my peer group, everyone was doing things, whether it was a small graphic design business, whether it was musically, bars were starting to open, they were looking for designers to do things with them. My peers were suddenly

realising that there were opportunities out there, which in the past hadn't really existed. We had just gone through a period when the only work out there for architects was public sector housing, it was the only thing that'd survived through that recession. We came out of that, and I came back full of energy from Berlin, feeling the impact of a city. It wasn't about a building, it was a city and what a city was doing. I came back to Glasgow thinking, "It's all the things that are going on around you" and all my friends, all the people that came out of the Art School or wherever, were all doing things. People were writing books. I mean, the Transmission space at that point in time – when you look back at who all came out of that and their careers – all of that was happening around the city. That breeds a culture of confidence and a can-do attitude. And I think knowing that the City of Architecture and Design 1999 was on the horizon, there were people coming here. You know, Deyan Sudjic turned up to lead the charge. So Glasgow felt as if it was being recognised and it had a cultural confidence about it. And that, to me, was a big thing in my decision to set up practice.

**B:** I may not seem to be asking a lot of architecture specific questions, please don't interpret that as being uninterested in the specificity of your business, but some of these more general ideas are interesting because from the outside, someone might be quite surprised that the presence of a good clubbing scene and interesting bars full of interesting people, which as I understand it, you've included as elements of the scene which facilitated your success; some people might find that quite surprising. So they're intrinsic?

**A:** Absolutely. My whole career, I can relate it back to one pub.

**B:** Okay, which one?

**A:** I think Bar Ten. It conjured up everything for me at a point in time.

**B:** I understand that. There's a pub, it

no longer exists, it was knocked down, called the Wig and Pen which was next to Edinburgh College of Art, which...

**A:** Yeah, a few people I know of went there ...

**B:** It had a massive role in my life at a certain point, and a large number of people's lives, and still does and gets written about.

**A:** Ben Kelly (designer of The Hacienda in Manchester) suddenly did a bar in Glasgow (Bar Ten). You relate that back to what was going on in Manchester. There was a hairdressers open next door. The people that were running the hairdressers then opened a clothes shop. Just everything started. You suddenly realised that a pub as a design challenge was something that was important. And that's how we started – we started doing bars and restaurants. They were things that allowed you to experiment. You got away with things, and I think what happened to us coming out of university was we quickly got exposed to building things, making things. We did a pub, for instance, the Beer Hall in Gordon Street – that was one of the first things. While we were doing the Tramway we did that. We had four artists out of the Art School worked on it with us. So we had someone doing the concrete, we had someone making the tables. That bar was amazing, there was about six people all involved in that and as I say, we got to experiment with materials, with budgets, thinking about how do you do this in the space of three months? So that sets you off.

**B:** It's interesting to hear it articulated. There's a German word, *zeitgeist*, we don't really have a direct translation but in a way it's what you're talking about, and it's notable that you came back from Berlin because Berlin seems, on the face of it, to be quite good at generating and sustaining what you described as a scene.

**A:** I landed there without having any understanding of the impact that place would have on me. I couldn't quite believe the way spaces that were being transformed for music were as important

as what was going on with the galleries that were opening up. You were getting amazing bookshops but actually, what was going on at the club scene had even more of an impact in terms of the life cycle of the place.

**Bob Last note:** *As an aside but perhaps an example of the interconnectedness of some of the creative industries. I had not met Alan before this interview but Deyan Sudjic, referenced above, studied at Edinburgh University at the same time as I did and was a part of a group very frustrated with where architecture was at the time. The Hacienda, whose architect Ben Kelly's work in Glasgow is referenced as an important milestone, was founded by an old friend of mine, Rob Gretton, who was involved – who was involved in the same music scene as I was. Turner prizewinner Martin Boyce, who is also interviewed for this work, has been a committee member of Transmission Gallery.*

**B:** Going back to where we started when I was pushing you for an answer as to whether you were successful, what did success mean for yourselves? You said that it meant you'd made some buildings that you like and your peers recognise, which suggests that some direct business measure was not necessarily the first or only measure of success.

**A:** If you were to look at success as purely commercially driven, you would look at how your company grows in terms of people, in terms of turnover, and that's not been our motivation.

**B:** But you are, in fact, growing despite that not being your motivation?

**A:** Well, that's interesting – growth, for me, is something that – I mean, what we've done in terms of Melbourne is significant, really significant, and it's something I had to think hard about because I worry about Scotland. When I was studying, I looked up to certain practices that were Scottish, folk that were teaching me, folk that were in and around the university, and you think "That's who you want to be, they've

got a practice that's well established." I compete with these people now, and I think that they have rested too much on laurels. Why are they not producing buildings outwith Scotland? Why are they not building in Europe? Where is their global presence? And it frustrates the life out of me that we somehow do not get outside. And when you look at music, for instance, you look at art – we're everywhere, literature, we're everywhere. Architecture, we're inside the walls of Scotland. And that, to me, is a problem. If we can do it through music and we can do it through other cultural disciplines, why can't we seem to compete outside? It's really bugged me. People have often mentioned to me that, "You are different because you work in London." That wasn't a strategic decision. London – kind of – came to us. We suddenly happened to find that the work was being recognised and as I say, I'd like to think it was to do with the quality of the work, but I think we were a curious bunch who were operating outside London in a kind of rough-and-ready city, and people looked at our architecture and it's got a bit of grit about it – you know – these guys are quite interesting, let's invite them to the table.

**B:** It must, to some degree, have been about quality of work. Some might think, of all the different creative industries and creative endeavours, that the success or failure of a building ought to be easy to measure – does a building work or not – its purpose is more clearly defined. I'm not sure that's right but I think people might think that. But what you're saying is your success outside of your own direct peer group might have been about some quite difficult to define elements, like this sense of grittiness, cultural elements around your work.

**A:** It's got an attitude to it, attitude comes across in other cultural walks of life, whether it's...

**B:** So what's attitude?

**A:** Well, look, we're surrounded by buildings, the majority of architecture falls under the radar in terms of common

day pieces of architecture which have got absolutely no attitude; it's process driven, formula, and it comes down to how they clad the building. It's has no measurable atmosphere of the space, in terms of the attitude to materials and whatever else. And I think that's the failing of, sadly, everyday life in the built environment. But we came out with a bit of ... I think there was a sense of experimentation, risk-taking. Part of it was naivety. We didn't really understand the legalities of 'if you get this wrong you could get sued.'

**B:** So that allowed you to...

**A:** That allowed us to do things. If you knew everything, the things we know now... I mean, I look back and think some of our best work was some of the things we did on a: "Look, let's just do it". And I think that's the thing that quickly established us with a reputation: "Look, they're doing things." I mean, people would call it innovation. It was literally we were thinking: "Why not? Let's try this".

**B:** Innovation is used to describe lots of things that I don't see as innovative, perhaps this thing you're calling attitude is more useful?

**A:** It's an attitude to the way you work and the way you think.

**B:** Just for the record, Ollie (Alan's son), is sitting in the corner on the floor wearing a very scary Hulk mask as we talk.

**A:** I take him to every meeting. That's the attitude.

**B:** As an embodiment of attitude, Ollie's got it down. It worries me that when innovation is applied to things that aren't in fact innovative, just to fit to an external rhetoric, then that confuses attempts at policy. Of course, if you sit there and you're trying to make a policy that's designed to facilitate attitude, I can see why that's a tricky thing. So, does that

attitude necessarily cost the customer or the client or the end user more?

**A:** Does it cost them more? No. It doesn't.

**B:** In your particular area.

**A:** No, I would like to think it adds value. How you measure value, we're getting into even more semantics here, but at the same time...

**B:** Everybody, I think, understands loosely that there may be some value that is difficult to measure and is very difficult to talk about, but the starting point of talking about it has to be to find out what people like yourself actually doing these things, feel that value is.

**A:** As I say, going back to Berlin for a minute, Berlin was a place where you weren't aware of any particular policies, you weren't aware of any particular manifesto. There was a generation of people at a particular age doing things and finding a way, a creative output, whether it was through music, dance, whatever, there was a celebration of creativity going on. And one thing was working off another, architects were working off graphic designers, graphic designers were working off musicians and film-makers. It was a city that was going through change that was allowing that to happen. People were exploiting the fact that policy and legislation hadn't really caught up because it was a city that was still trying to find its identity. Ownership of buildings, ownership of space was still a bit muddled, so it was a place that lacked a lot of particular regulations. It was quite a unique thing, but I think a place going through change like that can facilitate a lot and allow things to happen. In another way, I feel coming back to Glasgow at that time, there were a lot of things just happening. I can relate it back to the licence trade. There were things happening in the licence trade with no certainty as to how they were impacting on things. We had the licensing laws that allowed the city to open all night, and it was things like that happening. That didn't just mean that pubs were selling

more alcohol, it meant that things were happening. Folk were saying, "I'm going to go off and do a one-off event. I'm going to do blah, blah, blah."

**B:** Well, that's an interesting thought, isn't it? A policy decision in another field was made that, from what you're saying, might have inadvertently been an extremely good policy for the creative industries, even though it wasn't...

**A:** Absolutely, subtle changes to legislation and policy can have an incredible impact. An example is the smoking ban. Think about that, 2006, everyone was going on about the smoking ban. I remember thinking and looking at the city and thinking: "Jesus, we've been talking about street culture in Glasgow for the last twenty years, comparing it to Barcelona, embarrassingly, compared to Barcelona. Overnight we've got a street culture because of the smoking ban. It's forced people out on the street." I've got an incredible lecture I do, it's about 100 slides of the city after the smoking ban, and it's people using spaces in the city you would never normally use, folk standing with umbrellas outside bars. Of course, there are some bad examples, domestic pergolas appearing in the civic streets, but I thought it was amusing and serious at the same time.

**B:** I'm sure everyone who is a non-smoker has had that experience of going and hanging out with the smokers, I've been out on a night out and ended up hanging out with the smokers in the cool bit.

**A:** Well, one of the things about Melbourne, just to put it in the Melbourne context, in a strange way I find Melbourne more akin to Glasgow than a lot of places I've been. And that's partly why I've decided to do this. I've been in Sydney before and I've been in Perth, didn't really take to it, didn't think I would ever have a role in Australia. I turned up in Melbourne and suddenly thought: "Jeez, this is like Glasgow twenty years down the line with a population growth that's double what it is." The back lanes, for instance, are all used. But the thing I realised with it is

you've got three or four pubs, restaurants sharing a public toilet. You've got licensing laws that are relaxed within the lanes to encourage folk to do things. You've got rents that are capped. There's a number of policy directives that allow things to happen that are bringing value to the city, they're bringing an incredible experience in terms of nightlife and everything else, and safety.

**B:** These initiatives sound like they're consciously recognising this idea of a scene?

**A:** Yeah, there's things happening that allow the city to evolve and change, and my worry here just now is we've reversed twenty years of positive change with some significant things that have happened. The Lighthouse (Centre for Design and Architecture) closing isn't a major loss in terms of the physical space or anything like that. I think the building is overdesigned to start with. It was the wrong building, completely wrong brief, and I would happily say to anyone I think it's a disastrous building for what it was meant to do, it should have been a large warehouse and let us get on with it. So I don't think it's a physical loss, particularly, but culturally, the amount of people like myself and other folk who gave time to that place to support its national presence, it's more about what that said outwith Scotland, to me, than what it said inside Scotland. To then allow that to close the way it did, I think a lot of people just lost trust at government level. I got asked about a year after the Lighthouse closed to come and do a round table discussion for Fiona Hyslop's new cultural policy for Scotland (Fiona Hyslop, Cabinet Secretary, Scottish Government). And I looked round the table and I thought 90% of us have all been here doing the same thing for The Lighthouse before, you're talking about the same thing again, you're asking us to shape the same thing we just closed, come on, what's going on?

**B:** I have to say, what's interesting about being asked to do the work that I'm doing at the moment is that the government have quite explicitly engaged with the idea that

they need to understand why creative people are doing what they do. Although it's not articulated, I sense there's an understanding that many policy initiatives in the creative industries and cultural area are not having the impact they could. Of course part of that reason is that the policy is reflecting a very imperfect understanding of the creative industries, but that is perhaps because there's all these difficult things you've talked about, scene and attitude and uncertain growth. These are incredibly difficult for policy to engage with. We're looking out the window there at Transmission and it's possible from outside of the creative industries or cultural economy to go into Transmission and see some challenging installation piece and understand what attitude means in that context, whether or not you're critically engaged with the work. In terms of architectural practice, actual built architecture as opposed to conceptual work, can you give an example as to how attitude might inflect a space or a building? Or is it just something that is in the fibre of it?

**A:** I think there's certain buildings that in themselves have an atmosphere about them. Whether that's to do with the architecture or the spatial quality or to do with activity that goes on, it's a combination of things. The Lighthouse, an example there – it's an easy one to pick on – but I think The Lighthouse came across as a commercially driven space. It had an architecture of commercially driven endeavours.

**B:** I've never heard anyone make that critique of The Lighthouse being an overdesigned space before, but there was something that never quite felt right.

**A:** There's spaces you walk into and just feel, "Right, this is a space that allows you to do things." It felt precious in there. There was a veneer. I think walking in there, you kind of felt as if you were experiencing the bureaucracy before you were experiencing the heart and soul of what that was about. But that's not to take away from what I think was amazing about it. I wrote Stuart MacDonald's foreword for his book about

the importance of it.

**B:** I understand that's not a reflection of your view of The Lighthouse as a whole project.

**A:** So I think the architecture – you can get it so wrong, and the architecture can actually represent everything it's trying not to represent. I mean, I think this building for example, what's interesting in here is you've got a building that...

**B:** We're in the Wasps... what's it called?

**A:** It's called South Block. And this is the cheapest job we've ever done. £440 a foot. Because of the size of the building it couldn't have been anything else. But in some ways if you'd doubled that budget, would we have done anything different? You could have killed the atmosphere of the building by trying to make it too clean. So in some ways the rawness of this building and some of its failings are actually what allows creativity to flourish. It's like the best Art School environment is a place where you feel as if you can drill the floors, paint the walls, have a club night inside your studio. It's a space that allows you to do a lot of things. Unfortunately architecture these days, I think we hide a lot, we wrap buildings in particular materials or we cover surfaces up, and we somehow police the way people might use them, if that's the right thing to say. I think this attitude I've got to architecture and space and the way people use things goes right back to the days of Berlin and seeing people take over buildings and doing something with them. I don't know if you ever came across Tacheles, which was the old artist colony (Kunsthaus Tacheles) in Berlin?

**B:** Yeah.

**A:** Which is gone, unfortunately.

**B:** They've shut that particular space down but I understand that in Berlin there is still a specialised legal status for spaces where the ownership is not clear or where somebody has gone bankrupt that allows them to be used.

**A:** Right, just as temporary spaces.

**A:** Just to come back to this building (South Block). There's something happening around here just now, which frightens the life out of me.

**B:** What's that?

**A:** Rent increase.

**B:** Possibly partly encouraged by the success of this building itself.

**A:** Yeah, this is the problem with gentrification. I mean Berlin's got the perfect history of that. That happens everywhere, London's got some classic ones. You remember places that were just falling to bits, they're suddenly the most expensive bits in the city. But here in particular, if you look at what's happened to the Merchant City, the Townscape Heritage initiative, which twenty years ago embarked on small scale funding for shop fronts and whatever else, and it's always had a culture down here of small studio spaces and small businesses. The Briggait obviously getting investment from Wasps, this getting investment from Wasps, are two big moves. And this building here, Trongate 103, these are three big investments in the arts which are an incredible commitment to a particular area of the city; they're regenerating the city through low cost art-based businesses. This is unique, this building, in the sense it's fully occupied. It's £12 a foot, it's not cheap with service charge, but there's a waiting list for people to go into it. It's completely going against the grain of commercial development because nobody else can let property; they're all 50% let, whatever. It's going completely against the grain that people want to be in here. It doesn't have double-glazing, it's kind of rough and ready, but they want to be in amongst other people that are doing things. On the other hand Ryden (estate agents) who are the property agents for the city, are now doing rent reviews everywhere and suddenly putting the rents up in places all round about and they're just about to sterilise twenty years of development. That twenty years of development came

from the city and certain individuals in the city who understood it – understood what regeneration meant on a small scale, and incremental growth, and they're allowing like a graphic design business to take over a shop and say, "Look, we'll keep the rents low to allow you to do that and have a presence on the street." And now these people are struggling. There's a hairdresser round the corner just given up – that's them gone. There are various people I know that have just given up now and they're moving out. And it worries me. These things will take away this legacy.

**B:** That comes back to something we started talking about, about the importance of a scene, as it were, of the zeitgeist to creative industries.

**A:** In terms of being an architect, it's not just buildings; I'm interested in places and cities. As I say, I've been very proud to have grown up as a practice in Glasgow and no matter what happens, Glasgow will be our base. Our practice has grown out of Glasgow, Glasgow's legacy. Over the last five to ten years I think there's been a lot of frustration at the things that haven't happened here, and the impact that that's had, that people don't understand. George Square, the decision not to do that, just the impact that has on two schools of architecture in the city, students are looking at that thinking, "That's embarrassing, I'm going to London." So that thing we tried to change, and the twenty, twenty-five years of change we managed to secure, we can say, "Look what you can do, just stay here, don't go away." We've incubated maybe ten small practices through Strathclyde over the years and that one thing that happened in that square, it's cultural cringe what happened there. And it worries the life out of me that the people don't understand the impact.

**B:** When you talk about something like that and not understanding the impact, is that because the people making those decisions don't understand these things like attitude and the importance of scene?

**A:** Absolutely.

**B:** Is that why they're making the wrong decisions?

**A:** I don't think they understand. They're individuals that are taking decisions about their individual careers, about what it says about them and their position of power. It's not about what it means to...

**B:** Okay, that may or may not be the case.

**A:** I know, it's a very generic thing to say.

**B:** Let's assume that the decisions are not being made because of some inappropriate self-interest; let's assume they're actually being made properly, according to process. The wrong decisions are still getting made, often, it seems. Is that because they're not understanding and valuing this idea of scene and attitude?

**A:** I fully believe that, yeah.

**B:** I think many of the people I've talked to would say the same thing because in different...

**A:** Look, it's what it says to people who are here, who are working really hard. It's a difficult thing to conceptualise, but there's a lot of people who have decided to stay here and be a Glasgow-based, Scottish-based company. People make those decisions for a number of reasons but I think these companies make those decisions when, actually, it might be easier to go to somewhere else, London for instance. I mean, ISO are probably another company you've spoken to.

**B:** I haven't, but I'm aware of them, yeah.

**A:** But you know, they're a company, we used to share an office together fifteen years ago. It was quite interesting how both companies have developed. The majority of their work is down South, Damien's from Manchester, but they've decided to stay here. And I think that sends out a particular message about who they are.

**B:** I think it does. Going right back to our starting point about what success meant, that for you it was making work that you liked and that was recognised by your peers; I'm wondering, is that value system that you have, is that where the attitude comes from?

**A:** I think so.

**B:** I suspect so. It seems to me that the two are somehow linked. A scene wouldn't work if it was full of people who didn't have attitude?

**A:** Absolutely.

**B:** Right, you put all those people together, you could have all the right apparent conditions, but what is it that animates it? When does a group of people become a 'scene' as opposed to a group of people? Is it when they bring some attitude?

**A:** I think anyone that's doing work of importance has got a particular attitude to the way they do that.

**B:** Okay, so why is it important? I imagine from our conversation that in your practice as architect it is measured by your peers and the public saying, "This building is of importance." Correct me if I'm wrong but what I think that would mean is that it has some value over and beyond its simple, physical value or dimensions; they're not going to say it's important because it's 10,000 square metres, they're saying it's important because it has some attitude?

**A:** Like any business you've got to consider the commercial issues with it. And I think our profession maybe is governed by a lot of commercial constraints.

**B:** It would appear to be unavoidable...

**A:** It's not rocket science to know that if you were to sit down with a brief for a building and look at it and say: "Let's work out how many man-hours that's going to take. We need to make 25% profit out of that. Right, that's how we're going to do it. We're going to put so-and-so on

it and we'll monitor that to make sure we get 25% profit." That's the way a lot of practices work, for understandable reasons. That's not the way we work and I don't think it's the way most creative companies work, creativity is at the core of their business, They sit down and work out what's the best. How are we going to make the best piece of architecture out of this? What are the important elements of this? Yes, you run a business, you've got to think about money, got to think of the finances, but you don't sit down there and think: "Right, what's the cheapest way of delivering this project?" It's also one of the difficulties; how do you balance that with commercial realities of the business?

**B:** It probably makes you a riskier proposition as a business, doesn't it?

**A:** Yeah. But I think this risk is a fascinating subject. Risk, from my point of view, is becoming something that is dominating certain businesses, certainly in procurement.

**B:** Taking risk or avoiding risk?

**A:** Avoiding risk. I think risk avoidance, especially given what's happened with the financial downturn, coming out of that, risk avoidance is everything – for obvious reasons. But the impact it's having on creative businesses like ours is quite considerable. And I think it's a really serious issue that has to be confronted by government. Procurement is killing off a lot of creative endeavour that needs some nurturing. And that nurturing, I don't know from a policy point of view...

**B:** How you do it.

**A:** How do you say to a young business that is starting out: "We'll nurture you"? How do you do that?

**B:** It is interesting that you talk about risk in the context of nurturing because somehow or other that has to be about risk and about facilitating risk. As you say, it can't be about avoiding risk. From what you're saying policy that's avoiding risk is killing things. That's probably an unusual thing from a policy perspective, "We want

to have a policy that increases risk."

**A:** As I say, procurement now, the pendulum's swung, we had a period of time when where design quality for any of our tenders were 60%, 65%, cost was 35%, 40%. That pendulum swung overnight after the downturn in the market and it's now cost-driven, which is now about 65% of the tender process. Design quality? Dropped way down. That one pendulum swing has had a catastrophic effect on businesses.

**B:** So when people are asking you to tender or quote, there are specific percentages put on these different...

**A:** Yeah, we went through...

**B:** Does that have, sorry to interrupt you, but does that have anything whatsoever to do with how you go around designing?

**A:** Absolutely. From my point of view, I wouldn't even bother tendering for a job because it's so driven by cost. I know how much time to get a good piece of architecture, I know what it takes, and I know I'm not going to cut costs. I'm not going to use a junior member of staff to deliver something that's needing a senior member of staff. So where we've gone in the space of two years is into cost-cutting and people trying to save. It's down to that, "Is he going to do it for 3%, 3.5%?" You just can't do it. You cannot deliver. It's moving projects that companies like mine would be working on into the hands of bigger companies who can do it for 3%, 2.5%, but the design quality's gone. It's ripped the heart out of that design process. And it's a serious, serious issue.

**B:** I understand that and I have a question relating to that in a minute, but is there a connection between risk and opportunity, from your point of view? Do you have to take risks to generate the opportunity to do work that's important or got an attitude or whatever?

**A:** I think risk-taking is everything in creative work. Whether that's to do with – I've thought about this a lot recently –

**B:** Why recently?

**A:** I'm not someone who used to sit down and try and work out a five-year plan. Never really been in that position where I've had a big strategy. I've always taken each project as it comes – right, I want to make the best building out of this – that in itself will promote the business and we'll grow. Each project is what we'll deliver. It's still an attitude we have, but with Melbourne coming up it made me really evaluate what I was doing because if I step out of the day-to-day Glasgow business, how does that impact on clients? How do they perceive the building? Do they perceive it as me or do they perceive it as a name? And how does that affect staff and how does that affect current jobs and everything else? And I started looking at us as a company and how did we get where we are? Looking back over that ten-year period, it has been about taking risks. I'm convinced that's the core. We have a particular attitude to design discussions, but risk taking, I think is key. You can see in just about every...

**B:** I was going to ask you, and in a way you've answered the question, when did where the practice as it is now seem possible? Was there a point back in time when you might have imagined where you are now? Or could have foreseen it? Was that point only yesterday? You said you're not in the business of five-year plans.

**A:** I remember in 2007 sitting and looking at things thinking: "Jeez, this has gone great." We owned an office in Dublin, we moved up to 26 staff here, we hit a million turnover. I mean, I couldn't quite believe in the space of six, seven years that suddenly I was running up and down the country and picking up all sorts of awards. It got a bit out of control because I suddenly realised then that to maintain the quality... a lot of our business has been built on personal relationships. As well as taking risks it's about relationships with people and building up confidence with particular clients and whatever.

**B:** If you think about what you just said



about risk and confidence, the two are closely related, aren't they – the permission to take a risk?

**A:** Absolutely. Giving a client confidence. If you really wanted to understand our business, a person that would be really good to speak to would be David Cook (former Chief Executive of the client Wasps) who has witnessed it. After doing this building he invited me to join his board. I remember David sitting down to tell me what he felt working with NORD after working with various practices over the years. We don't elicit feedback from clients, we just go and do the next job and you'd like to think they had a nice experience. Maybe there's some fear of asking the truth but David's not short in telling you what his experience was. It was interesting him saying the experience of working with NORD is not like any other architect he'd ever worked with. Sometimes you need a client to tell you that to make you think maybe we are doing something a bit different.

**B:** Since that point on 2006, 2007, things had grown, from what I understand, fairly rapidly. Did that then continue in some linear...

**A:** No. What happened was Ireland was a disaster. We grew really big overnight. We didn't put the support mechanisms in. Not for the want of trying. We sought out support from Scottish Enterprise, got the door shut on our face three times. And if maybe we had a bit more business support at that point in time it would have been different time, but I had to just find my own feet through that process. I'm not scared to admit my shortcomings. Creativity and design, yeah, that's my passion – the business side of things is something I find difficult. You make mistakes and you learn from it. We're still a well-recognised company. We're still fourteen staff. We've got an office in London. Who didn't go through a consolidation at that time? We had to shut Ireland. We lost about £100,000 over there because we had a practice we had to keep going for a year. It cost me £10,000 a month, nearly. And I was

clinging on with my fingertips thinking: "I don't understand how this is happening."

**B:** I personally understand exactly that kind of problem.

**A:** I was staring absolute hell in the face.

**B:** I've sometimes said to people, I wonder whether the most useful business advice and support people in creative industries could get is how to downsize rapidly.

**A:** Absolutely. Look, nobody teaches you at architecture school the legalities of business, about hiring and firing. My practice was built on... most of my staff are graduates, people I taught, there's a trust there. We don't have that: "You've only been here twelve months, we'll let you go." People get so engrossed in a project and that was horrendous, 2009, I had to start letting people go. And what was killing me was that Ireland was affecting me. It was the office in Ireland. We were actually in a really good position in the UK, we were really good, strong, had lots of work, we were busy and I was sitting there looking at the fact I need to resource these jobs yet I've got a company bleeding me dry across the water, but it's all the one thing, I can't just shut the doors. I can't just sever it off. I had to go through that. But the experience of going through that is probably one of the best things, I mean, it was horrible and I never want to repeat it, and I would never repeat it but I learned so much through it, about myself and about business, about people. And we came through that and the core team are still here. We're a business that's still doing fine. Whether I would want to grow again, I'm scarred from that. I'm scarred from where it put me in terms of management. If I were to grow again I'd probably bring someone in to handle that side of it. I've consolidated to a scale that I can manage every side of the business.

**B:** No one I talk to as part of this research, when asked what their aspirations are, or if you ask them what constitutes success, nobody says growth.

**A:** Quality's my thing.

**B:** There are people who have got quite big businesses yet growth doesn't seem to be a driver of the business, all the same there seems to be a way the sector overall can grow? From a policy point of view, growth seems to be the easiest tool or measure.

**A:** I completely agree. I think from a personal point of view, growth is part of my agenda, hence the fact I've done the thing in Melbourne.

**B:** Is growth the same thing as ambition?

**A:** I think they're different. I mean, I've not sat down with a business strategy saying I want to grow. But I have sat down thinking, "What do I do with NORD? This opportunity's come up in Melbourne, should I be trying to push London?" And I've decided no, I'm going to go to Melbourne, I'm going to try and develop a business over there that's complementary to Glasgow. And partly because I look at Melbourne and think it's got so many similarities to Glasgow. It's to do with a place. I actually feel comfortable there. London, I love dipping in and out of it, I don't see it as a compatible place.

**B:** We are going to look at some of the businesses I've been talking to in more economic detail, I don't want to get too much into economic detail now because it's been very interesting talking to you to elicit an understanding of values and what drives people, and you've been very articulate about that. But I am, of course, curious; you said at a certain point in time you had engaged with Scottish Enterprise in a less than productive...

**A:** Absolutely. Terrible experiences.

**B:** And why were they terrible?

**A:** I mentioned ISO. When I was doing the Tramway I was sharing an office with ISO and we were very close. They were just starting out and everything else. Anyway, the internet back then was quite a new thing and I remember them

telling me they were getting support off Scottish Enterprise to fund a new web developer, way back then, and thinking: “God, web developer? That’s interesting.” And they got a full salary paid for a year for someone – they had hardware, software. So I’m sitting in the same office watching my friends suddenly grow with all this support from Scottish Enterprise. Damien (of ISO) said to me: “Look, why don’t you talk to them?” and I sat down one day with this chap and he said: “Right, we need your five-year business plan.” I said: “Right. I don’t know what I’m doing in a year, never mind five.” “Oh, well, we can do this and we can do that.” It was like £3,000, we’ll match it and we’ll give you this company to work with you. And I went so far with that, I met with this company and I must admit, I sat down and thought: “Right, wait a minute, you’re looking for £3,000 to write me a five-year strategy?” My attitude to that is that I need to get a portfolio of work up and going to understand where we sit within our discipline. Anyway, we spent a year, and I wouldn’t say they weren’t fruitful, there was some interesting discussions come out of it but at the end of it I was told that architecture wasn’t really something they supported and I was like: “Oh, right, okay.” So that was it. A year later, another friend of mine started working for another graphics company and I got invited to the launch. I remember turning up at the studio, ten brand new Macs, all mod-cons and I’m standing talking to the director and he’s saying: “Yeah, yeah Scottish Enterprise gave us X amount. So-and-so gave us X amount.” Their whole thing was based on saying: “E-commerce.” I said: “Ah, that’s interesting, so e-commerce is where they’re putting all their money these days.” In December 2006 I’m walking down Buchanan Street and I get a phone call to tell me we’ve won this job in Ireland. It was an amazing phone call and I thought: “Christ, this is it. This is everything I’ve been working to. I don’t know what the hell to do.” I was over the moon but really, I don’t know what to do next here. I was standing on Buchanan Street outside the wee single story pavilion Scottish Enterprise managed with a sticker in their window saying: “We

support business growth.”

**B:** Sorry, I shouldn’t have laughed at that.

**A:** Oh, no, I can laugh about it. And I thought: “Oh, right,” and I phoned them, I hadn’t even got back to the office and I phoned this number and said: “Look, I’ve just won this big job.” I was talking 100 miles an hour. “Just won this big job in Ireland, I need to expand, I don’t know whether to expand entirely... blah, blah, blah anyway, I need an office manager.” I knew exactly, I need an office manager, someone to take all this away and let me get on with it, and this chap replied: “Yeah, we don’t support businesses in Ireland,” I said: “Look, I’m a Scottish business in Glasgow.” Anyway, this conversation was a disaster. I came off the phone really angry and within about ten minutes I got a phone call from the supervisor saying: “I heard that whole conversation, it was badly handled, I’m going to give you a mentor, someone will come out and see you. I really apologise.” Two meetings were organised, nobody turned up. Third meeting, chap turns up and sat with me, we went through three months’ worth of consultation and he came back to do a presentation to me and the first slide said: “Don’t call yourself an architect, call yourself a product designer. We don’t fund architecture.” Now, at this point in time I’m a lot more savvy to what’s going on. I mean, I get involved in discussions in the creative industries and all this. I found it interesting that architecture, if you look at any policy, is part of the creative industries, yet, when you go to talk about funding and support it’s one of the service sectors that’s outwith the creative industries. It’s our own fault as a profession. I blame the profession more than I blame...

**B:** But I think you would find that there are other people in the creative industries who have had that same experience of being asked, or feeling at least that they’re being asked, to say they’re something else in order to attract support.

**A:** Absolutely.

**B:** And one of the reasons we’re doing this bit of work is because something I’ve reflected back to government is that probably half your policies are not only not working but are actually creating destructive noise in the system. It’s clearly a bad thing that that amount of your time was taken, it’s quite destructive it would appear to me.

**A:** As I say, it was terrible. I was getting invited along to round table discussions about the creative industries, the role of creative industries as someone who people would recognise as a part of them. We were perceived as not just an architecture practice which I found quite amusing, people would say: “Ah, but you do other things,” and I said, but that’s the world of architecture, we don’t only build buildings, we do other things, just like the graphic designer that plays music on a Friday night in a pub, we do architecture but our built environments do so many different things. We had graphic designers in house, industrial designers. I just think when you’re badged with something people have preconceptions about what that is, they just don’t understand your business and the way you work, so yeah, that was a terrible experience and it did scar me a bit. I got quite bitter about it because I was seeing other people come and go and get investments, they would last a year and disappear. I was thinking: “We’ve got a track record, we’re growing.” And when things went bad in Ireland, that’s when I really needed help, that’s when it really upset me.

**B:** It’s interesting. It taps into something I’m wondering about. I met a young woman called Hilary Grant, she lives in Kirkwall. She’s got a day job to support her business. She does knitted accessories, they tap into a traditional thing but they’re quite contemporary as well. She’s in Kirkwall, she’s selling to the equivalent of Harvey Nicks in Tokyo and boutiques in Sydney and New York. So she has this enormous reputational capital but is not yet able to earn a living out of it. And that’s quite an extreme mismatch, but something you said there made me think that when you were talking about



your track record – it seemed not to be recognised. So there is this consistent theme where creative industries have reputational capital which maybe policy needs to find a way of understanding and valuing if it is to work well. Does that...

**A:** Yeah, yeah, absolutely. In the time I've been in academia, it's opened my eyes to the world of research funding which is an absolute minefield, but it's thematic. Suddenly someone says: "Add sustainability to it," and it unlocks everything. You certainly get these thematic areas of interest.

**B:** I'm sure that we can all recognise that government may have priorities that we may not fit our own interests, but actually the example you've outlined is one where policy was accidentally being destructive, wasting time.

**A:** Sorry, you'll get me going. Just to go back to this notion of regeneration. Regeneration, for me, is something that politicians talk about a lot, councillors talk about a lot, they talk about regeneration as if they are orchestrating it, as if it's them that are allowing things to happen and it's not. Regeneration is happening through endeavours like Wasps, and in Glasgow in particular, I think the best parts of the regeneration of Glasgow have been through someone deciding I want to open a café or a bar in a very small scale, someone saying I want to do an exhibition or open a small gallery, or someone saying I want to do a building like this. And it suddenly has all this capital that comes off of it and impacts and rolls out which is very hard to evaluate. I think it's a fantastic study for someone to say: "Actually, I'm going to try and measure how much impact that had," purely based on an arts creative strategy. As I say, I think from a commercial point of view and a building surveyor point of view, if you take this building and take another building in the city centre that's had a £10 million makeover and it's sitting half-empty, then from a policy point of view, which one was right and which one was wrong? That's wasted £10 million and it's sitting there empty, here (South Block)

we have got a fantastic culture around that particular building. It crosses over every discipline, it's not just architecture, it's everything that comes from that. I'm fascinated by that whole notion of the creative industries, that we keep hearing so often about how much value they bring to places and Scottish life and the economy and go back to the Cox Report (a reference to the February 2013 report by Sir George Cox) and all these things. I think it is fascinating.

**B:** To really understand what makes your practice tick, what questions should I have asked you that I haven't asked you?

**A:** What makes it tick?

**B:** Am I missing something about what makes you get up in the morning?

**A:** I think it's quite easy, every project is just another challenge. I'm obsessed by the challenge of what we do – it is not an easy process to deliver a piece of architecture, it's bloody hard. My wife's a graphic designer and I envy her ability to just sign a job off and hand it over and get on with her life. Everything's such a mark to build a building, deliver it, and because of all the constraints through that process, that's the challenge that gives me a bit of a buzz. I think it's also the embrace of other disciplines. I love that every project we've delivered has had a fantastic array of other hands on it which I think is a big part of the culture of the office, we embrace all the other disciplines and we really enjoy that. We enjoy the fact that we sit down and say: "Who is our design team?" It's not just an engineer and another consultant – we bring people in from other walks of life.

**B:** I didn't know that about your model before doing this interview, and it takes us right back to this sense of a scene and a zeitgeist in a way, doesn't it – because it places what you're doing at the heart of it?

**A:** The risk taking, I think, that's an important one. There's projects we do in there that don't make money. We

make that decision, that's going to be a financial loss to the company. If we had an accountant sitting beside me we'd be a different business.

**B:** On that note, a very good note to end on, I won't take any more of your time. Thank you very much.



# Interview 2

Alistair McAuley

Conversation between Bob Last and Alistair McAuley, partner of Timorous Beasties, Glasgow-based textile design and manufacture company, at South Block, Glasgow

25/06/2013

**B:** It's very easy to define Timorous Beasties as a successful business. It's certainly perceived in the creative industries in Scotland as having all the outward signs of success, but are you successful?

**A:** We are now, but the point we're at is probably the point we should have been at about seven years ago. We've been successful since we started, we just haven't been financially successful. We've done what we set out to do. Paul and I, our idea – albeit naïve at the outset – was to set up our own design studio, and do our own thing. When you leave art school you're full of it – we didn't want to work for companies, we wanted to do our own studio. We had the benefit of having a lot of interest in the company, especially at the time that we started. There was a minimalist abyss, and we were coming out of art school producing highly decorative work, the complete polar opposite of minimalism.

**B:** So at this point your work was radically provocative?

**A:** Yeah. It didn't fit into that culture of the time of everything being taupes and greys and slick. So we knew we had an uphill battle on our hands, we also knew we had something to offer something that was different. People around us strongly believed in us but not enough for anybody to actually start buying stuff, which became very apparent almost instantly although people loved it. We felt we were always on the right track, we felt we'd successfully created this business from the start but, as you know, people measure success in many, many different ways.

**B:** You said yes you were successful but not financially successful. To the extent

you're working within something that's called the creative industries, that's immediately a challenging statement – the notion that success might be possible for something that is on the face of it, a business, but is not a financial success?

**A:** Paul and I built twenty metres of print table in a studio in Maybury Street and we had all the inks, all the screens, all the bits and pieces but we didn't have any fabric to print anything on. So we tooth and nailed. This is the kind of thing that (if) we had any kind of business side to us, business knowledge, perhaps we would have obtained a bit of venture capital in the start and maybe kept more to our business plan – but going back then, straight out of college, your main aim was just to do a design and get it out.

**B:** Perhaps if you had more, as you put it, business knowledge, perhaps you wouldn't have started?

**A:** No, we wouldn't have kept it going. Looking at profit and loss, we'd have said this is a financial disaster. If we were run by accountants, we would never have happened. Fortunately enough for us, there was always, always something fabulous on the horizon. It would always take us up another level. Subsequently, by the time we got to that level we'd got ourselves into a whole other bucket of shit, which that level wasn't quite enough to lift us out of. So it kind of kept on like this, you would move forward but you were dropping down a little bit, getting deeper and deeper the further you went out. Oddly, we were at our financial leanest, sorry to keep referencing finance, but that's when our creative side suffered the most because we tried to do work that we thought would sell, and that was the kiss of death because people that buy our work buy us because we're a niche market, they buy us because it's not like anything else out there. To sum them up, the people that buy from us wouldn't normally buy fabrics and wallpapers and that's really evident in the shops. When we opened up the Glasgow shop it was just hilarious because, not to be too stereotypical, but guys would come into

the shop, you know, heterosexual guys would come into the shop and be very comfortable – as opposed to the image of textiles, that it would be the women that would make the decisions.

**B:** I can tell you that I was one of those heterosexual guys who comfortably bought a flowery plate that I would never have done in other circumstances.

**A:** Paul and I joked at the beginning of calling the company Heterotex, (laughter) not against homosexuality but to make a stand for heterosexuals in textiles.

**B:** That is very funny. For some time you were constantly taking a massive economic risk because you were pursuing something quite difficult to measure that was over the horizon. From what you say you weren't taking that financial risk as part of a conscious high-risk financial gamble, it seems that you were taking that risk for some broader set of reasons.

**A:** We had no money anyway so we were actually risking nothing. We weren't saying "Right, there's £20,000, let's do this." It was very obvious that it was tooth and nail. We'd do a little bit of work, get some money, and then that would enable us sometimes to pay the rent. It sounds like quite a bleak kind of picture, but it was a very, very difficult time, 1990 was also a recession, kind of like this. I mean, this is what, our third, maybe fourth recession, if you include double dips?

**B:** You picked a good time to start a business.

**A:** Picked a great time to start a business selling stuff that nobody needed, and that was our thing. So we always felt very fortunate that people did start to buy it, and the thing that kept us going was the fact that we were getting lots and lots of good coverage. That's why we had this image of being very successful without being financially successful because we were in almost every magazine, newspaper – you know – there were little television bits about us. So we were greater than the sum of all these parts

that were put together.

**B:** That's something I think is quite a common theme, you had reputational capital that wasn't monetised.

**A:** Absolutely but that kept us in the belief that it would work eventually. We were probably too focused at the time when we got to the really lean parts on making money, you know, trying to make things cheaper or make ourselves more approachable, make ourselves more marketable, and it really didn't work for us. We had a conversation with a chap who worked for Scottish Enterprise at the time, called Francis Vierling, who is now over in Ireland, I believe; nice guy. And we just sat and did a very simple exercise one day where he said: "How much does everything cost you to make?" And it turned out we were retailing things for half the cost price. So it was like: "You guys, think about this logically." So we effectively doubled our prices overnight. And we were at that point doing design work for other companies; this was very lucrative for us, doing other design work, and we realised that we're no longer a manufacturing company, we're a designing house. People were asking us to design stuff in our style so therefore other companies were getting a grip on us, so we took a very conscious decision at that point; that was probably our most grown up decision – to stop doing design work for other people and just purely concentrate on our own. So we doubled our prices, stopped doing work that was actually bringing in the money. So we did things that felt quite...

**B:** Counter-intuitive?

**A:** Absolutely. You think: "If you're not selling it, make it cheaper" and that clearly didn't work for us. And then, after that point, the pivot was 1997, we actually started making money. I mean, we peaked and troughed over the coming years but the trend was definitely on the upslope. We quickly realised we don't need to do what the market expects us to do and this was a real emphasis for us to stick by our guns, but ironically probably

our biggest sellers are pieces we did in the very early stages, if not at college – when we weren't selling, when we weren't thinking of any of that.

**B:** I was talking to a guy, David Thomson, he has what he calls a digital toy company making games. I asked him: "Do you do market research?" And he said: "Of course I don't do market research because people will tell me they want more of what they know; my job is to imagine something. There's no point in me asking about it." Which, of course, goes in the face of all conventional business approaches, but in a way you're saying the same thing.

**A:** If you're a niche market company then following what's in Marks and Spencer's is not going to work for your company.

**B:** But what is that niche? You are striving to use market language to describe what Timorous Beasties do. But if you talk about what your customers are buying, it seems to me they're not just buying it because it's a niche, what is it? What's the value that makes the work distinct?

**A:** We have a very strong identity in the products we produce. I've always said it's just as important for us as a company to have people that don't like our work. If everybody liked our work we'd be Ikea. We would just be a big, broad, bland spectrum of work. What keeps us apart from all that is the fact that some people do hate our stuff. We had a lovely little picture on our website once where somebody had graffitied on the wall "I love Timorous Beasties" and somebody else had written: "So do I." And somebody had written: "I don't." It was brilliant. So I took a photograph of this and we put it on our website because this is really important. So we're in a very selective market and a very expensive market. The goods that we manufacture, they cost a lot of money to make. We reject a lot of stuff if it's not right and we're really picky about where characteristics become flaws and all this kind of stuff. So it's not artificially expensive like a lot of products that are out there. We do try to attain a quality, keep everything in the UK. But I suppose

we call it a niche market because it is an easy kind of grouping to call something. Which is effectively selective. We never approach anybody as a market. Until recently we haven't actively marketed ourselves and we're only actively doing it now through tweets and all that kind of stuff, which, to be fair, Paul and I really have zero knowledge of. We've sat through many a meeting just glazing over, quite frankly. I still like the newspaper or the magazine article. I can understand why tweeting and all that kind of stuff works, but to me it's not something that rings my bell.

**B:** Thinking about your customers, do you think of them as customers?

**A:** Obviously the shops and the website deals with end-users. And then we have the other side of the business that deals with architects, designers, who come to us. They don't come and say: "I want you to do a print with giraffes on it." We're not a contract printers or designer. They come to us with basically elevations and say...

**B:** "What would you do with this?"

**A:** Right. So you end up having a very good relationship with practices and you'll dip in and out of work with them because there's stuff, again, being strong in character. People use us for a certain amount of time and then they stop using us, and then years later they come back. So we have this very slow moving cycle.

**B:** I am still trying to understand this niche, because your customers aren't coming to you because Timorous Beasties are a niche – they're buying something richer?

**A:** They're not buying wallpaper from us – they're buying like a piece of furniture that someone would debate over buying. Not an Ikea-type furniture, but something that's a bit more (...) one term that utterly appeals me is when people call us artists. I was at a meeting yesterday and was introduced as "the artist" for doing a stone thing for a building on Regent

Street. And neither of us have been remotely comfortable with it but I can see why people, because the work that we do tends to be very indulgent, it doesn't seem to follow any kind of market trends, we don't do navy blues and whatever in spring, and we have just stuck by what we quite like. And it's that kind of dogmatic way of keeping yourself to yourself.

**B:** You could think that the value comes from you ignoring all the normal things that might generate market value.

**A:** Yeah, we've learned that the hard way. The joke in the studio between Paul and I was, the two of us would say: "This is going to make a load of money" and it was the kiss of death! You know: "That's it fucked, that'll never sell a shred."

**B:** It's interesting that for some people the easiest way of understanding what you do is to describe you as an artist.

**A:** Yeah. We fulfil a brief. Our product all has purpose. Even if the purpose is just to make somebody feel better, you know, the room look better – it's not got a chair you can sit on. They're all decorative products. Their function can be attributed to something but generally it's just because they look lovely and this is our thing; it's got to look fantastic. Whether it's the likes of the Glasgow Toile, for example, which had, famously, your junkies and all the rest of it. That's a very successful print, hardly made a penny off of it, but people loved it and it made all the press. Same with all the Toiles, they haven't really made money, they've done okay, but not as much as, say, Thistle Pattern, for example, that have made ridiculous amounts of money...

**B:** So there's not always a match, those pieces that contribute to your reputational capital don't necessarily equate to the things that really make money...

**A:** Success isn't money, isn't always money. Some things have this unit of success which is because it's a really good thing, or it's unusual or it's interesting. And

we have prints that we still advertise, we still have on our website, we still send out samples for – but we haven't sold a single piece of. But it's good for the collection, it's good for the body of work. If it was all about stuff that sells financially, the collection wouldn't be as diverse. You see that with lots of products, lots of companies. It's maybe only 5% of the products that actually make them any money, but if you take away 95% of the stuff – it still doesn't have that gravitas. We keep the print part of our studio, we've now got two print tables, and again, the cynical side of it was now we can fuck things up twice as fast – because the print table doesn't make money. The print table is a fantastic thing to have, and hand printing, people think: "Oh, Timorous do hand printing." Which we do, we do it every day.

**B:** From the outside it's a big part of the brand.

**A:** It's probably only 5% of what we do now. Both print tables are busy all day every day, but it's a means to an end for Paul and I. Now 95% – if not more, is produced by other companies; financially, the print table just loses money, but it's good for the company. It gives everything else that heritage. Remember there were a few years where almost every company had wallpaper? It was really cool for a rug company or a jeweller or a fashion designer – or do you remember Habitat had ... was it actors and singers and all that, remember they did a VIP collection? And they designed a chair and it was just that kind of association thing. We had a panic chatting with the woman who used to run Cole and Sons at the time – in fact, that's who gave us our second print table because it was lying in her garden rusting – she was in a total panic because she said there's sixteen companies that have a wallpaper. I said: "Well, next year it will be down to three or four," which it was. And there's been periods where we've had, on the face of it, lots of competition in terms of there's other products, other hip and groovy, I mean, pieces I would have bought myself, like Committee did some fabulous wallpapers, a few other

companies did. But that was it. They did maybe 100 rolls and that was the end of it. Whereas we were seen as a company that was there, we did it from the start. That was our thing and that's what stood us in good stead going on.

**B:** Was there a point at which where you're at now, was something you had earlier imagined in your head?

**A:** Yeah.

**B:** When was the moment where you started heading to where you are now?

**A:** Like I said, we should have been at this point five, six years ago. Although we don't seem cautious, we are, we're very, very cautious about what we do. Because there is still a level of investment in any new design, but we trust ourselves insofar as this could be really quite funny, for example, when you're putting stuff out there. Our criteria for putting things on the market has changed. We understand our own product an awful lot more without having to worry about if it will work well in the market. You know, you're aware because you look at stuff all the time, we buy magazines, you flick through them. I'm always amazed at people that can count off names of designers; I've not got a clue who's made what or where because it kind of doesn't come into it. I like things but I don't have to get into the nitty-gritty of it.

**B:** You don't have to formalise your knowledge or awareness?

**A:** No.

**B:** I would think it would be quite likely that people would approach you to buy Timorous Beasties out or to take it over.

**A:** Yeah, three times. We had one, I think it was in the first year of our business starting up, it was definitely within the first eighteen months.

**B:** So this was when you were successful in terms of the reputational part of the business but not successful financially.

**A:** Yeah, we looked great and this is what this company picked up on. We were in every magazine, we looked as if we were manufacturing fabric and looked as if we were manufacturing wallpapers. And yes, we were, but putting an accountants head on you'd go: "Oh." Because anybody coming into the business wouldn't have seen it as a viable company, looking as if they're doing really well, let's get involved with this. And for one reason or another we always backed out, which was nice because it was important to Paul and myself that when we started looking into it, it became apparent that somebody's maybe wanting, you know the classic 51-49; they would sell you a smaller portion of a bigger pie. So you would go down so far and think: "You know what? We're going to end up doing stuff that we're not really interested in doing." And the last time it happened was probably about four years ago, because we had the shop, because we actually had a meeting with the chap outside the shop. And he was talking a great game, and we just had a bit of a reality check of saying: "We've got this far without anybody." The reason we opened the studio is because nobody would manufacture. The reason we opened the shop is because nobody would retail. All these different things we did ourselves because nobody else would do it. So we've done all this work, do we really want to sell that off now? I am utterly glad we didn't, we're now twenty-three years old and we're doing okay, we're doing fine.

**B:** Even now when you're in an economically much better position, as I understand it, that other value is still very important to you, you're still making decisions where you're prioritising other values over a straightforward economic transaction?

**A:** Yeah. We see them all as being very important.

**B:** And are your customers buying those other values?

**A:** Yeah, we'll see people coming out the shop and loving a particular design but

will buy maybe the Thistle because that'll fit nicer in the house.

**B:** You also said that in those moments when you tried to second guess what people might want, you made things that they actually didn't want. So can you articulate that other value...?

**A:** No. Both of us have to make the decision. Both of us don't have to like the same thing for it to go out. We don't design by committee. There are designs out there that I don't like. Designs out there that Paul doesn't like, and that's fine. Or we'll promote other designs at different times because we're both quite competitive with each other, although we both work at the same game. You know, twenty-three years of working within three yards of each other can be quite tense, but we both have the ultimate goal which is not a financial goal, it is just to produce amazing things. The kind of things that make you think: "This is just fantastic." And I think that's what makes a difference. On the face of it we don't really care if we sell one roll of wallpaper or fifty rolls of wallpaper.

**B:** What you're talking around there, you have articulated very clearly that the other value is in providing pleasure; there's a pleasure in the object that you've created or a material that you've created. Of course when people are talking about policies and industries and so on it's very easy to forget pleasure.

**A:** I can only be really comfortable with that now that we are paying all our bills and we are paying all our wages. So it's quite an indulgent thing to have. We can send stuff off to various different manufacturers, we get the samples back and it's really exciting. Some things are shit, some things are good; you look at that and go: "Right, we'll bin these. These aren't working. But this, this is working." That's a really exciting point for us. And then when it comes to the money side of it, like how much are we going to charge for it? It's a very simple equation, this is how much it cost us, this is what we have to do, we have to double it to then send

it to that, and that's how much it costs. So something that ends up being £150 for a roll of paper, then that's it. And the beauty is we're not forcing anybody to buy it. It's not medicine that we're selling. People can go: "That's ridiculous, £222 for that roll of wallpaper." I don't care, we can have wallpaper at £1,000 a roll – it doesn't bother me. We did Grey Stones, for example, just as a kind of joke. And there were a couple of articles written about how ridiculously expensive they were, but I'm not forcing anybody to buy them. That's the beauty of them. It's nice that people do products which you don't need, and you don't need to contribute to financially.

**B:** I'm curious – are there people for whom it's a big economic statement to buy? I'm assuming that the vast majority of your customers are ones who, although these things are expensive, it's relatively comfortable...

**A:** No, we still get that feeling of (Alistair takes a sharp intake of breath): "Oh... if I buy eight rolls can I get a discount?" Well, that's not a lot. Maybe if you buy a couple of hundred rolls we'll talk about it, because we don't do sales, for example – kind of for that reason. One sale we do a year is a secret sale, which we do purely for charity and it's all the seconds, and test prints like these things that come back from manufacturers that are shit. We sell them for what they cost us. And every bit of the money... it actually started out that we needed to have a studio clear-out, somebody said: "Why don't we have a sale?" Well, if somebody's just bought a roll of wallpaper at £200 and then 6 months later... it's not like a shirt or a jacket that you might not be wearing in six months, but the chances are these people are going to have this wallpaper up for ten years. I said: "It's utterly objectionable if we can then knock 50% off it at a later date." So we just never have sales. We don't get involved with, you know, 10% off. We had a couple of newspapers recently wanting to run a reader's discount. If somebody's going to invest the money I would much rather they didn't feel as if we were knocking it

down later on. And nobody can complain about the charity sale because we don't even take our costs out of it, the whole lot, you know, we've got five charities that we put money to. And we don't advertise it, it's just word of mouth. Well, last year, they tweeted it on the week leading up to it but without saying where it was going to be, it was just going to be soon, because it is a fight like you've never seen in your life. It was over and done with within an hour. Although we'd had it on for three hours. But no, the money thing, people do come in, you do have people that obviously don't bat an eyelid at the cost, they spend an awful lot of money. You know, when you're getting a package this size and it's £3,000. And other people, you know they've saved up for it. And the shops do as much as they can to ease that kind of burden with all sorts of stuff, we've helped people out in a lot of ways in terms of they've been short or their decorator's made an arse of it. Because you get a lot of decorator's panicking because they think, "If I make an arse of a £200 roll of wallpaper it's a different thing."

**B:** It's not just popping down to B&Q.

**A:** Yeah, and get another £20 roll. But you can tell, we have people in the shop all the time, obviously there's that kind of you go into a shop and have a look at something off a peg and you see a £400 ticket on it, you don't go: "For fuck's sake!" You just move on. But people come into our shop knowing what kind of shop it is.

**B:** I wasn't asking from a judgemental point of view, but it is interesting and I wonder if it goes back to this thing about where that other value is. I was talking to Jamie Byng, proprietor of Canongate, about what the brand value was or what the reputational capital was, and he said: "The main thing is I just don't give a fuck about the money." It was a fairly blunt way of saying it but it chimes with some of the things you're saying. He was very clear that the more he asserts that mantra, the more interesting the brand of Canongate as a publisher becomes because the choices they make are more interesting.

**A:** We can't compete in the market. We certainly can't compete on price with anybody, so that's your option, you either compete on price or you compete on the other value, the anti-value, the whatever you want to call it.

**B:** Anti-matter, it is. Most matter is dark matter that you can't measure, it's a bit like that.

**A:** That's what we trade on. Because at the end of the day, one roll of wallpaper, the paper itself has probably cost £10, brought in from Germany and then the company prints on it and then we kind of say, "The design's a bit off its head, it's taken a long time for a design, we have to put in a value for that thinking." Well, you know what, we're not going to sell thousands of this, we might sell a couple of hundred, we'll certainly sell tens. So we introduce a value in that market, and generally we're kind of close now. But we've still put out things which have been wildly expensive and have sold incredibly well. Oddly when money got tighter it was the more expensive products that actually started moving again, which is very curious. It was a kind of defiance. Everybody was cutting their prices or putting out cheaper products – we were putting out more expensive products because, again, we found it quite funny to do that. It's like they're saying they're doing a diffusion range so everything is all slashed, well, we've just done a wallpaper at £350 a roll.

**B:** An especially expensive range.

**A:** It wasn't expensive, it was just because we thought: "These are beautiful pieces of wallpaper, they've taken forever to design, they're fantastic quality."

**B:** But there was a cheekiness though.

**A:** Absolutely. But again, I stand by everything that we do because we don't force anybody to buy it. They don't have to buy it.

**B:** Did they sell?

**A:** Yeah.

**B:** So that cheekiness is somehow part of that strange value that can't be measured, isn't it?

**A:** Yeah.

**B:** Instead of people reacting badly, they embraced the cheekiness.

**A:** Yeah, because they see that sort of irreverence to what we do insofar as we will design stuff, not ridiculous, very traditional images but we will maybe exploit the scale of them or the detail in them. You know, like a butterfly or a flower, it's classic textile imagery, but we maybe make the butterflies such a size that we draw in all the little bits that are quite gruesome.

**B:** A playful thing.

**A:** We find it quite exciting to have something kind of cheeky or rude, but it still has to be beautiful, you're not just drawing a big pair of tits and a dick on something just for a shock. Whatever it is you're making it has to be beautiful.

**B:** So the brand value of what you do lies in insisting on applying beauty to something that's uncomfortable? Whether you're talking about detail on a butterfly or perhaps something that seems to have more social content. Is there a social content in what you do?

**A:** People have extracted that from it.

**B:** They have, that's why I'm asking the question. I mean, mostly, I think they've extracted it because of those junkies (a famous Timorous Beasties image).

**A:** Yeah. Absolutely. You take the junkie out and then it's just an architectural vista of Glasgow. And it just has your Armadillo in it. Or you take out a couple of characters like the single parent mum, we assume that they're single parent mums because it's more interesting. You've got two choices, there's humour to it, you can show the Victorian shepherdess with her



little dog herding the sheep, it's all lovely and fluffy, or you can show a junkie lying on a bench in front of a bush. I suppose it is culturally challenging because you're trying to make it domesticated. It's not socially acceptable, you're being cheeky insofar as normally you would have a pretty flower on this, now you've still got a flower but it's ever so slightly different. You have a park scene, but it's ever so slightly different. And our stuff is always just that little bit different. It doesn't go radically different. Our stuff is very traditional, we take days or weeks to do drawings, and we pride ourselves, and work very hard at producing lovely drawings, and get quite excited by that, the two of us. It certainly takes up the least amount of my time in the studio, sitting down with a piece of paper and a pen or pencil and then drawing stuff.

**B:** I'm interested in exploring that thought. There is an idea that being creative is a mystical moment, it doesn't refer to anything and it just pops out. But everybody I talk to is an observer, they're reflecting back their environment, the world they live in, and making new mash-ups and mix and match, and that's where that moment of creativity or originality actually comes. It is actually embedded in their wider experience. Martin Boyce, the sculptor, used the term "wild knowledge" to explain that, which was that kind of knowledge which you didn't set out to get in an organised way, but that nonetheless fed into or even drove what you were doing. As I understand it, that playfulness and that cheeky decision to mix and match is where your creativity lies. You're deploying other skills, but that's the heart...

**A:** Yeah. As textile students, growing up, being trained in that area, going out to see companies that produce contemporary textiles, what you were seeing was reinterpretations of archival work – as in, they would take out an old design that was maybe 200 years old, re-colour it, everything would be softer, everything would be very market-led, even a bird with a pointy beak was quite radical. That's why it was probably so easy for

us to stand out. You know, you'd go out to Sanderson's and Wardar Fabrics and Liberty and all the rest of it and you were thinking: "God, this is the industry that I've chosen to be in, and this is the market. I couldn't work in this studio." I worked in a fashion textile studio for a summer and it was great fun being down in London for that seven or eight weeks but it was just appalling, the way you had to work being a designer. Which was you had one, maybe two designs done by the end of the day. Christ, these designs would normally take me three months to draw something. So financially we were on the back foot from them because there was no way, with the market values, you know, a furniture fabric £400, fashion design you get £150, maybe £200, regardless of whether it took you two minutes or two days or whatever. So I thought, we'll never make money if we do a design and sell it for £400, so when we graduated we sold two or three and we sold them for, I remember selling some to the furnishing industry for £800 each. And the going rate was about two to three hundred. You would never have done it if you hadn't had that horrible arrogance that you get when you've just graduated. You know, you think: "This is it." I mean, I only sold like three of them. It wasn't enough, but it was like: "There's £750" and we kept it at that. Now all the stuff that we do was originally stuff that we kind of hated. I mean, all the Toiles are a comment on the market because the original Toiles were fantastic, they were all social commentary, so what's been done is nothing different. People are just so used to seeing that Victorian thing, where the scenes are all very sanitised, they're all very pretty and fluffy, when in actual fact they depicted war, they depicted rape, they depicted murder, social unrest, all these kind of things. So by doing this, it's still in keeping with that idea. You say, "What's contemporary now?" You've got junkies, you've got muggers, and just putting all these things in. So they're not new. They're just contemporary.

**B:** So even in introducing social content, you're articulating a tradition.

**A:** We're just using exactly the same

values. So having a guy with a mobile phone is utterly current and absolutely right.

**B:** You've used the word indulgent three or four times and it's a very self-effacing term to use to describe what you're able to do and where the value lies. It seems to me that when you talk about indulgence, that indulgence is the heart of the business. Without that indulgence, as you describe it, there isn't anything.

**A:** I suppose you're probably looking at somebody else to indulge themselves in the purchase of it. So if you haven't done that yourself, how do you expect anybody else to do the same thing?

**B:** Is there a question I should have asked you?

**A:** No, not at all. I'm quite surprised at the ones you did ask (laughter).



# Interview 3

Christy Cole

Conversation between Bob Last and Christy Cole of Briggs & Cole, at South Block, Glasgow

09/07/2013

*Briggs & Cole 'Art + Design Works' was founded in 2012 by Glasgow School of Art graduates, Jane Briggs and Christy Cole.*

[www.briggsandcole.co.uk](http://www.briggsandcole.co.uk)

**C:** Briggs & Cole is a Glasgow-based design studio. We specialise in furniture, lighting, objects. We usually make limited edition pieces and we also specialise in bespoke one-off consultancy that could be for a private residence, business, retail.

**B:** What's an object?

**C:** Object is difficult to define because you can have a part-object. But we're interested in that transition between something that's functionless to functional. We look very hard at our processes and manufacture as being much of the value the client gets out of our work. So it's that intersection (between functionless and functional) and the gaps between. So what is an object? What is the scale? What is the material – does that fit with the client's need? What do they want? So we ask all these questions of design and how it fits with our everyday life. I suppose understanding the needs, as much as coming up with solutions as well.

**B:** I thought when you said 'object' that this could be where the difficult-to-pin-down bits about what you do might reside, whereas furniture is a model that people can understand fairly clearly, lighting equally. You talked about gaps and you talked about value – I'm particularly interested in trying to understand where in your design work you see the value when you go home and explain to yourself why you do what you do. How long have you been going for in this current entity, Briggs & Cole?

**C:** We set up the enterprise in late 2011. We launched the company 30th March 2012, so really in business just over a year, so it's very, very new. Jane comes from a product design background. I come from an art background. We had discussed what we wanted to do, and we could see that there was maybe an alignment of our skills and expertise and we knew we could learn more, and hence with the aid of Cultural Enterprise Office we prepared a set of proposals that would then form the business plan, and then after that, with further training, we set it up as a business.

**B:** You're from an art background?

**C:** Yes, Art School with Fine Arts and then studied multi-discipline art. So I've worked in film art and object-based installation. But I've always had an abiding interest in design and the function of objects and that kind of led me to question more about how I could collaborate with a designer. Our work, our main drive, is a collage narrative and that's kind of personal to things that inspire us, but it also could be a client's memory or punctuated by something – a series of events, or to commemorate something.

**B:** Is it just the two of you in the business?

**C:** Yeah.

**B:** And Jane came from a very much more functional design background?

**C:** Yes.

**B:** So when you were setting up the business together, was it integral to the business to bring this art sensibility together with the functionality, to explore that?

**C:** Yeah.

**B:** Was that something that you saw as a problem or an opportunity, or is it just what you did?

**C:** If I'm honest, there was a kind of reticence because I've been a successful artist, been a professional freelance, and I've always been swithering about this collaboration with a designer and how that would impact me – but it hasn't hindered my practice in any way. Between these gaps in the knowledge and the expertise and co-creation, it's actually accelerated it in a different direction, which was opportunistic, which I kind of sought, although I didn't know what the results would be. I did it because it was exciting. But I knew the risks involved. I think that's always inherent, you will always have this element of risk in pushing yourself a little bit further. In hindsight, it's interesting when I looked to art dealers or galleries, they kind of view this decorative or image-based work that's implemented in some way in a kind of innovative strand in design as quite interesting, because you talk to many artist-designers and they do have an architectural design background, or they've worked for big companies in design, all these different crossovers.

**B:** Do you still have an art practice? Do you still make work that you would consider to fall outside of Briggs & Cole in the art world?

**C:** I don't. Everything's tailored into the business. The energies are channelled in that direction, very much so. It's very much concentrated. I think it's key that there's a definition there and there's a line that isn't crossed and if it is, for something that's one-off, then it's not to do with Briggs & Cole. It's an interesting question. It's more thinking of the design structure with the artwork as opposed to artwork per se.

**B:** Everything that you do at the moment is somehow positioned around the business?

**C:** Yeah. And I've had people coming up to me and asking me, and I've had to knock them back or say it's not this kind of work, thank you very much. I feel like I've got the time and energy that I need to work on the business side, and I like to keep that brand intact. I think there's got to be

a barrier somewhere.

**B:** So Briggs & Cole is a brand?

**C:** Yeah.

**B:** What are the brand values?

**C:** Brand values?

**B:** What does the brand mean or embody?

**C:** It embodies a high-end luxury design that is exclusive and it is made a certain way. I mean, you're looking at different people who would buy our design but it's trying to make that appeal of the exclusivity a bit more inclusive. It does have a value, but I would like to think if someone would want to invest in a piece of design, they feel they can. It's not just high-income, or if people want to invest in something then they feel they have an affinity to that and they want to enjoy that piece, that's great.

**B:** I think you've mentioned risk, what is that risk? The first risk you talked about seemed to me to be a sort of creative risk rather than a business risk. If what you're doing involves creative risk, can you talk a bit about that? You said it's intrinsic to the process?

**C:** Yeah, creative process. We're based in Glasgow – it's got a very strong alliance between art, design, architecture – these practices. You can live anywhere but it's got a good support in terms of the creativity, but it's also got a good business network and infrastructure, because they go hand in hand because they can't exist without each other – as we've found. Geographically, a lot of our clients, networks we've built up, are London-based. It's a fact of life that although Scotland has generated a lot of creative businesses, it's got its limitations as well. And what we have to look at, facilities we've got here, how we measure the kind of risk, what's available to us, and then make quite strategic decisions on how we go from A to B or a different direction.

**B:** Was there some point when you were at college, or when you and Jane got together to work together, when what you're doing now is what you imagined you would be doing? Or has it just been a journey of discovery?

**C:** Journey of discovery, yeah. I'd always imagined in college I'd be interested in set design and three-dimensionality, that kind of transition between a two-dimensional object or thing that's made with a three-dimensional aspect.

**B:** Are you at a point now where you would be able to look more concretely forward to what the future might be?

**C:** Yeah.

**B:** So there was a period when you were on a journey of discovery, but now you could focus; actually, I don't want to use the word focus because that sounds judgemental of being unfocused, I mean it...

**C:** I know what you mean. There's a pragmatism there – a set of values that we would adhere to, and we would like to think that our clients, whether it's dealers or galleries or investors or people that are working with us, that would engender those values as well, so that you're on the same sort of level. But there's always interesting things that happen between the gaps of knowledge and understanding. That's kind of key that everything's not too finite. You're still on this journey even though you have a pragmatic set of values and rules you're working towards.

**B:** I think it's fair to say that quite a number of the people that I've talked to use this combination of pragmatism and being open to – everyone has their own language for it – but you talk about being open to the gaps. Martin Boyce talked about 'wild knowledge' which is kind of knowledge that just finds you, rather than something you go and seek in an organised way. Jamie Byng talked about channelling. Actually these are all words for the same thing, which is the importance of the unfocused part, and it's

been quite interesting how consistently that's emerged. If you've been a creative practitioner of any kind, it's something that you can intuitively understand. But it is very difficult to understand if you've not been a creative practitioner. What do you do in those gaps? What happens in those gaps?

**C:** For a scientific analogy, of the nucleus with the atoms and things, the molecules become unstable, there's breakages but that kind of slippage of motion becomes something that generates a new idea, some become redundant but there's something there that's got an untapped energy. Our co-creation with a client, maybe you give something back again which is reciprocal. So for example, you could be working with a scientist who is looking at the scope for 2-D imaging, which has got aspects of three-dimensionality. That excites me, I don't have that knowledge, someone else does, but they are looking to coming to a product side of what we do. We're interested in a secreted notion of memory, time and place. How do you distil that in a design? It's these questions of something compressed or something injected that is timeless, a capsule within something, or embedded.

**B:** I don't want to say too much about a critical discussion about the work, but you do mention something that's interesting because fundamentally you make furniture, but you talk about narratives. Is there a way in which there's a story embedded in your work? People, in trying to explain their work, often talk about a sort of narrative that goes into it. I was talking to, I think it was Hilary Grant who makes scarves up in Orkney and for her too, there's a narrative about her experience of the world goes into those scarves.

**C:** Yup.

**B:** I've asked a lot of people this question and they find it quite difficult. Are you successful?

**C:** Yes, I believe we are successful in terms of, I mean, how do you measure success?

**B:** I was hoping you would tell me that! Of course, being successful, doesn't mean there might not be further to go. So yes, how do you measure success? I'm interested in what it is that – for you – allows you to say, “Yes, I'm successful.” What's your measure of that?

**C:** Success. I suppose it's not always in the end product, it comes back to this value you have in your relationship with your client, and how that's perceived by peers, expertise in that sort of field. You're always your own critic, I think, as well. And I think a lot of designers and creative people get really tied down on being overly anxious about details of things. We admit we've been like that before as well, and we've maybe spent more time on something than we should have. You learn quite quickly in these processes not to get too precious, but obviously with the market we're in, we're looking at the detail and it has to be very, very good otherwise it's not good enough.

**B:** You seem to be suggesting that success is about seeing people's enjoyment reflected back to you?

**C:** Yeah.

**B:** I know I'm being very reductive here in the complex things you're saying. But for you that measure of success, if you really boiled it down, from what you say – it's about the sense of pleasure other people are taking?

**C:** It is, yeah, and we've got so much to learn, we're still very young in the growth stage.

**B:** So that learning process, how does that work? Are you learning all the time? You said you're learning because you're young and it's early in the process, do you think there's a point where that learning will stop?

**C:** No, I think it's always continuing; you're always learning from others and their experiences, and bringing that back in. Sometimes it's inflective, it's not always that obvious sometimes.

**B:** It's inflective?

**C:** It can also be through a conversation, or through discussion can give an idea, but it can also think about something you maybe had a doubt about. But it does go back to that, it's not always about generating the highest success, we measure that success but it's about the enjoyment at the end of the day. I would want clients to talk about the narrative and pass that onto someone else, a cultural heritage or lineage.

**B:** So let's just talk a bit about your clients. It's interesting, right from the start when you talked about what your brand is – it seemed to imply quite a complicated relationship with your customers. So you do make some things for sale in the conventional way?

**C:** Yep.

**B:** And is that generally furniture or objects, lighting or is it across the...

**C:** Across all three things there, yeah.

**B:** And in terms of the business model, they're high end? What sort of...

**C:** Yeah, medium to high end design, yeah.

**B:** Currently, what does medium to high, in terms of pricing, mean?

**C:** It could be anything from £60 for a small object, anything from between £500 to £5,000 or more if it's something which is bespoke.

**B:** You have clients who come to you and commission something.

**C:** Yeah.

**B:** How does that work? They come to you and say, “I want a dining table and chairs”? Or do they come and say, “I want something and I've no idea what it is”?

**C:** Both.

**B:** Both?

**C:** Yeah, which I find interesting. They can have very specific needs, it can be ergonomics of a space that they need and they're not finding something. The first thought is: “That's great they're coming to us, but why are they not getting what they want out there?” It could be something they don't know they actually want. If they don't know what they want, how do they price it? A lot of design and other businesses get really caught up on how they price themselves per hour and then they add that with materials and give themselves a small margin for whatever that end cost is. But actually, if you think about it, for high end, it's about how they enjoy the piece, how it starts conversations, how many hours are they going to sit and look at this thing and talk to other people about it and enjoy it? That's the real value.

**B:** So at that higher end, your customers put a value on these things, this stuff that can't be pinned down?

**C:** Yeah.

**B:** You talk about the gap and that quality of enjoyment that can't be pinned down – it seems to me what you're saying is that it's easier for these higher-end customers to put a high financial value on something they can't quantify. There might be a disconnect between the value of the hours you've put in and this unknowable value?

**C:** Yeah, this bubble of value. Which I think is very interesting, it's something we'll always look at very carefully and continue to question. At the moment we're doing a research trip to America, as an example. We've never done any business in America; it's a big market, there's fifty states, and we're looking at

one area. We know we've identified the galleries, yes, there's dealers, but who are these designers, specifiers? I'm asking these questions at the moment because I've got a set of objectives that I have to then present, everything has got to be backed up with facts and it's a case of we're not going there on a whim. We need to be going there...

**B:** Somebody else is paying for it?

**C:** Yes. It's research, but what are we researching? We're not going there to sell, we're going there because at the end of the day we'll have a portfolio but we want people to commission us. Why would they commission us from the other side of the world? What's different about us? What differentiates us? Have we competitors in Glasgow? Are most of our competitors elsewhere? All these other questions come up.

**B:** So who is facilitating you going on this research trip?

**C:** Scottish Development International have part-funded it. We said, "Look, we're identifying these things that are happening here, these certain trends and we want to know, we want to be on the ground engaging, talking to people, finding out who they work with, how they work – as a potential scope. We want to see how that works potentially for us in that high-end design because they do congregate in one place there. And we're seeing links between London, Miami and Milan at the moment. And there's very strong links there in terms of the design fair being there, and there's connections between them all.

**B:** Right, so it's a design fair that you're going to?

**C:** Yes, it's a major one there.

**B:** SDI want you to evidence what you actually do, you said in terms of facts.

**C:** Yes.

**B:** Will those facts actually reflect the value for you of the trip, do you think?

**C:** They may or may not. I can say that from another experience of going to another design fair whereby we found out from on the ground – there was no selling or design – it was about the communication, the interaction of designers, manufacturers, dealers talking to each other, and we got other benefits out of that that weren't sales, or some gallery taking us on. It was actually about finding out processes of manufacturing. So it may well be the same. We have assumptions as well as core questions of what we're trying to find out. So that there will be facts. But there will be experiences that are unknown to us at the moment. So until we've been there... I like that value of being there and talking to people face to face and having that conversation.

**B:** So say ten years hence, do you have a picture of what that might look like if everything went well?

**C:** Mm hmm. Some notion, yeah. Ten years is kind of...

**B:** Well, it's fine to say no, you don't know. There are absolutely no right or wrong answers. I asked that question because – thinking about what you said about the importance of what you called the gaps or the unknowable element that we talked about, which you've been very eloquent about it being a core part of the business – it seems to me that logically projecting three or five years or ten years forward is much more difficult, if you accept that that's part of your business. You have also talked about politics and social circumstances and cultural developments in general. In thinking about the future, are those broader things factors?

**C:** Yeah.

**B:** Is that because they're factors that one has to practically manage or because they're things that you respond to in some way?

**C:** Definitely both there, yeah.

**B:** Both?

**C:** Yeah. A practical one, for example, could be how we look at the materiality and manufacturing and how that affects things in Scotland, and how we're trying to keep that, retain that and we are finding methods, ways of working with people and it's not just this kind of notion that it was once a booming industry – it's not as great as it was, but there's still some fantastic people there.

**B:** Just a slight aside, that is the part of your brand value, referencing that industrial heritage?

**C:** Yeah, someone in New York had mentioned that they like the fact that it's something foreign to them but there's something interesting about that, how I would want something made that's shipped over, as opposed to something that's from a yard round the corner from the design studio in downtown Manhattan or something.

**B:** I presume if it's a chair, you've got some pretty solid things you've got to deal with. People have got to be able to sit on it and so on but it sounds like some of these things that you sell have no starting point? If it's an object or it's a client coming in and they're uncertain does it come out of thin air? Where does it start?

**C:** It starts through conversation, you take them through a process and then you give them a set parameter and then knowing what they want, you give them inspiration. You talk through pragmatically about how you pin that down with them a bit more, and then it becomes a framework whereby you then come to agreement, and they're happy with that. But it's always keeping in close conversation, telling them what you're doing.

**B:** Are there diverse and complicated combinations of skills involved? You did fine art at college, was that here in Glasgow?

**C:** Yes, it was, yeah.

**B:** In what sense was that training for what you do now?

**C:** Good question because they do not train you, they train you in a professional artistic sense, but with no business clout or knowledge of how you position yourself and how you survive or sustain, how that applies to business. I think if I was ever going back into an institution talking to someone the first thing I'd be looking at as much as the work and discussing that, is how that relates to the big picture and practice outside of education.

**B:** I get the sense from a number of people I talk to, that maybe what they learned of value wasn't necessarily directly what they were being taught.

**C:** Yes.

**B:** Were you taught specific furniture-making skills? Or have you acquired skills that you need? It sounds as if every day you might need totally different technical skills, or are you constantly using the same core skills?

**C:** In terms of the imagery, that kind of college rawness, the process that arises from, is always there. But you're absolutely correct, there are multitudes of processes, because we're creating them from a need or an idea or combined material or someone specifically saying: "I need this." And so right, okay, I know somewhere, or if I don't, I'll find the right process. You build that up through talking to manufacturers with their expertise in that field, or with an academic who knows about a certain material, how it works, how it breaks, how you can test the material.

**B:** I want to push you a bit more on this, thinking about your education. I'm not interested, at this point, in what degree

you've got, but when you left college, what was the most useful thing you acquired during that period when you were at college in terms of what you're doing now?

**C:** I learned, I suppose, not to be too precious about what you're doing. I know that sounds a bit woolly. It's a confidence thing as well. I felt that I maybe had that but I didn't know how to measure it. I'm thinking about me as the artist creating the work, but it's not about me, it's about the work. Whereas in business, now, I think it's more intrinsically about us the designers, our relationship and our relationship with the client.

**B:** Do you have a more concrete engagement with the end user than you would have if you were operating as a fine art?

**C:** That's a good question.

**B:** I'm just trying to think this through myself. You're not doing what you do now as a retreat from being a fine artist, you've gone out and sought...

**C:** Our work is out there and it's engaging and I think that's important. In terms of why bother, in terms of our business, I think it's really important.

**B:** It throws up an issue that I hadn't really thought through before. Arguably, if you include a commercial measure, even if it's not the sole measure, sometimes that can give you a closer connection with your audience than if you're operating in the fine art world. I'm going to come back and ask a question we've already talked about, see if you can give me another answer. When you reflect on why it feels that you're engaged, let's say you're engaged on a successful journey, that you haven't reached some successful end point, what part of that can be measured economically? You talked about growth but you also talked about sustainability. So what element of that success is an economic measure?

**C:** I was thinking in terms of facilities based here and how you can make, produce your work, and then if you are thinking about internationalism, how your work is then – say it's America, Middle East, they like that aesthetic where it's got that Scottish connection, there's extra value in an almost transitional layer, it's travelling from here as opposed to just being made. There's something in the fact, like I said before, if they're not getting something and they're wanting something, then there's value before that – the value in what they get, and then how it travels there and how they enjoy and tell that story to others, and how it's the product cycle, if you like.

**B:** And then obviously if they put that value on, if they put an economic measure on that value, you then get an economic benefit from that?

**C:** Yeah, the kudos.

**B:** But you also get an easily measured economic value. Currently you're able to make a living from doing this – or is there other work? Quite commonly the model is people have to do other things, are you currently making a living out of the core of your brand?

**C:** Jane does other work to fill the gaps at the moment, but we'll get to a stage where we will hopefully in the future.

**B:** If we focus in on that narrow economic measure, what would the aspiration be? Where would you like to see yourselves economically?

**C:** I think economically to have the brand value we have, and there's a kind of perceived value and then the actual value. I think the actual value is still some distance off yet. Our philosophy is there, we're still quite young, but we do need support to make that. Yeah, there's growth but the sustainability of that growth is really important. But then it's just patience, persistence. I still think in ten years' time it's about us, the people and our service.



**B:** Right, so if you did have a picture, that's the bit that you can still picture?

**C:** Yeah, maybe it's tapping more into that, yeah. But in order for us to get there we need more infrastructure and support. I think that's realistic.



# **Interview 4**

David Thomson

Conversation between Bob Last and David Thomson of Ludometrics, at South Block, Glasgow

26/04/2013

[www.ludometrics.com/about](http://www.ludometrics.com/about)

**B:** David, can you briefly summarise what Ludometrics is, for you?

**D:** I normally describe it as a maker of games, toys and playthings. So that could be what people think about when they think about a game, probably not to the same scale as Grand Theft Auto, for example, but it includes iPhone apps, board games, whatever happens to take my fancy. Originally it was set up basically to be a vehicle for me to do things. I previously had my own games company which was focused just on mobile phone games, pre-iPhone, when we'd just started getting internet connections, just started getting coloured screens even. So it was kind of more difficult to build things.

**B:** So you've always been working in an environment that has been changing incredibly fast. But when you said Ludometrics is set up for you to do what you wanted to do, that was make toys?

**D:** Yes, make toys, yep.

**B:** Do you think in a non-digital environment, you would have made toys?

**D:** Yes.

**B:** I'm interested in is what really is the heart of that, what drives that? Is it the playfulness of it? It's not digital technology.

**D:** The technology is basically a servant to the form. A lot of companies are the other way round; they'll invent a technology and then invent a game to go around the technology. For me it's much more that I want a game to tell a story – this story, or I've got this idea for a neat little thing you can play about with – what can you do with that? The technology is

never going to be a thing I can compete on anyway because I don't have enough resources behind me. So there has to be some other aspect to it.

**B:** So it's more about your imagination?

**D:** I suppose, yeah.

**B:** And is that something that you can start doing with very little resource? What sort of resource did you need to start?

**D:** Just me, essentially. Although I would probably veer away from ever releasing anything commercially that only had me on the arts and visual side of it.

**B:** Why is that?

**D:** Probably it'd be too ugly for people, it wouldn't be palatable for people!

**B:** So what you bring is the thinking?

**D:** Mm hmm. I can do most of the work on a game, whether it's an iPhone game or a PC game. But people have a certain expectation of production value these days. I always work with a contractor to solve that problem.

**B:** So is Ludometrics successful at the moment?

**D:** I'd qualify successful. We're profitable, which is good three years in, although there's only two of us on a full-time basis. But yeah, three years next month. I see that as some form of success.

**B:** I'm sure others would see it that way too. Some of that success is quite straightforwardly measurable. You've just said you've existed for three years and you're operating profitably, and that clearly is success. When you leave the studio or office, is that how you measure success?

**D:** I guess my aim is to have the company self-sustaining. At the moment most of our money has come through doing work for other people, which isn't scalable.

What we need to do is start building our own revenue streams so that our own products or own IP is making money while we sleep.

**B:** So if you are hoping to, as I understand it, gradually shift your business model, the measure of success will be a higher level of profitability?

**D:** Yep.

**B:** Is that the sole measure for you? If you had to change what you were bringing to the business to do that, is that a different proposition? If you're working in the fine arts, it's a fairly straightforward proposition that you're driven by some critical measure of what you do and the finance is secondary. There are some companies where, presumably, it's just about making money and if you start doing one thing you would happily drop it and do something totally different until you found something making money. But then thinking about what you said about Ludometrics, that it is a vehicle for you to do what you want to do, it suggests that there's possibly something more complex here. Are there rewards for you other than the money, that balance it?

**D:** Yes, I think it's somewhere in between the two. It's not just creation for creation's sake, and it's not just purely driven by the money side of it. It's creating the products that I want to see exist in the world because I can't play them at the moment, but in order to bring them in to being I need a certain level of freedom – so there's that constant tension. What I've always said to people is, I've got a twenty-five year view on this wherein I don't want to take on extra money, I want to avoid debt financing. I want to try and bootstrap this as much as possible between doing bits of work for other people, releasing our own products for different platforms and then ultimately just having a breadth of revenue channels for the company.

**B:** And so one of the drivers is to keep making something that you wanted to be able to play with. So growing a business is also about still keeping it where you're

making things that you would like to play with.

**D:** Which I call 'selfish creativity'.

**B:** That's interesting, isn't it? Do your customers value selfish creativity? Do they understand that?

**D:** I don't think they understand that that's the process behind it, necessarily. I think the way I approach it is that I don't assume that I'm so special and unique that I'm the only person in the world that wants such a thing. So the trick is then how do you create that awareness in other people that whatever you've made exists? Which is kind of the problem for any creative business and creative product, I guess. What we've put out in the last year has always been critically well enough received; whether that's from an editorial point of view, reviewers, journalists, or just looking at app store ratings. It's just about getting things to that kind of level of scale that they are actually generating serious income for the business.

**B:** And the business at the moment is two of you, you said?

**D:** Yeah. Plus a couple of freelancers that we turn on and off, as and when we need.

**B:** And the two of you, are you co-owners?

**D:** I'm the sole owner of the business. So it was just me for the first couple of years, basically, the first year of which I spent doing pure consultancy and a couple of work for hire contracts. But that was enough to teach me that I didn't really want to do consultancy and I wanted to get back to making things again.

**B:** So when you started, you started it as a vehicle for you to sell your skills?

**D:** Essentially, yeah.

**B:** But you were not necessarily clear that you were going to be able to make it into a platform to make toys?

**D:** I was at Denki for a couple of years. I was coming off the back of quite a long project and the complete disappointment of not getting a publishing deal for that, and then I worked a little bit with Colin (of Denki) to throw around "what-ifs" – you know, what happens now? It wasn't a shock to be let go but at the same time it's kind of: "Okay, what do I want to do?" And I didn't really know. I knew I didn't necessarily want to just jump into a job for another games company, which would have been the most straightforward thing.

**B:** You have been a full time employee?

**D:** Essentially, I guess, a Technical Lead or the equivalent of a Chief Technical Officer if a two-person company can have such a thing.

**B:** And then you have a consistent pool of freelance skills that you tap into?

**D:** Yeah.

**B:** If you look at where you're at now – which is successful albeit with caveats, and of course it doesn't mean it's as far as you want to go – but can you think of a point where that was something you would have imagined? What was the point when where you're at now appeared on the horizon as something that you might want to achieve?

**D:** Going back a couple of years, after I'd been working on my own for a year, and I'd started to think: "This isn't necessarily what I want to do, but on the other hand I don't really want to jump into something and try and raise a whole bunch of money, and try and grow something quickly that might not be the best strategy or the best tactic." It was more about deliberately keeping something small, just getting a good core team together initially – and trying to build the company up off the work that we do.

**B:** Keeping it small was a positive choice rather than seek other quicker routes to accelerate?

**D:** Yeah. That's deliberate. I've spoken to other games companies and they're all trying to do various deals and make distribution arrangements. I'll happily talk to them about it and provide my own thoughts and what-not, but it's not something I want to do with Ludometrics.

**B:** I don't want to put words in your mouth, but is that because it might take away from you that ability to make toys that you would like to see yourself?

**D:** Probably, yeah. At this stage I'm out to prove a point. Who to, I don't know, me, probably – that I can actually make a living, have made a living for fifteen years making games but if I can do it consistently and repeatedly without relying on someone else's commercial requirements. I'm actually trying to deal directly with (game) players.

**B:** You said that part of your driver or your measure of success or of what is worth doing, is the ability to pursue what you call 'selfish creativity'. I understand that as being that part of what you do is operating on your intuition rather than some externally measurable...

**D:** Yeah, I don't think there's any kind of external measure to that other than "do people like it?"

**B:** But when you set out on a path, that path initially is mapped out by your intuition?

**D:** Yes.

**B:** You don't do market research? Market research is a many-headed beast and I'm not sure even I know what it is ...

**D:** Certainly not from the point of view of focus groups or anything like that. I'm not trying to figure out, well what do girls aged sixteen to twenty-four want from an iPhone game? Because I wouldn't know. I wouldn't understand what questions to ask them even, to try and get to that. And chances are they probably don't know either, ultimately. They might want something that they already have but

slightly different.

**B:** That's what they would tell you, if you asked? That's a very, very interesting assertion; that, in your world, even if you were to ask your potential audience or market, they might not know?

**D:** They most certainly wouldn't know. I can bounce around ideas with people but it's difficult for people to envision something unless it's in front of them. The example I always use for that is the home improvement and property selling shows; every time you'll see someone go into a house and say: "No, I don't like the wallpaper," or something, they don't seem to connect that, well, you can change the wallpaper! And I think there's something, whether it's conscious or subconscious, some people more than others maybe, but there's definitely, at some level, a block to some people to see what it is that you're trying to describe unless you can actually just show them it. Typically what I'll do is build some sort of prototype, whether that's paper-based or a quick and dirty test on the phone or PC, and just let people mess about with it and watch them, because watching people is more interesting than having them describe what they're trying to do. People will say one thing but they'll do another. I'm trying to make the connections and read between the lines a little bit.

**B:** It is an interesting area. One of the things we're looking at here is trying to see if there are ways of helping people who don't instinctively understand this kind of practice, how to measure and map how it works. What you're saying is that you're selling your imagination, and by definition, you're selling it to people who are enjoying your imagination possibly because they don't have that imagination themselves. If you were to try some supposedly more methodical approach you'd get the wrong answers because they can't imagine what it is they want. From a conventional business point of view, that's quite uncomfortable?

**D:** I don't know any other way. But yeah, I can see it. I was reading an article about

this yesterday talking about the difference between McDonalds and Jamie Oliver. And it maybe doesn't hold because Jamie Oliver's now set up Fifteen, his restaurant, but it's basically saying McDonalds sets out a low bar because it is such a rules-based method for creating food. It's not about improvisation; a burger is a burger is a burger. Whereas if you go into a top chef's restaurant, that chef's personality is difficult to replicate exactly what he does across a number of chains. And even with Fifteen, Jamie's Italian restaurant, there's still a rules-based thing. They're working to certain recipes. Okay, the quality of the food's higher, but that's the only way they could scale it, whereas it's difficult to scale one person's imagination and talent. So it's difficult to work in that more rule-based environment. You can build a business around that, but it's not necessarily...

**B:** It's a different thing.

**D:** Yep.

**B:** I think you said Ludometrics has had a three year trajectory, and it was after the first year that where you're at now began to be something that you could foresee, is that reasonable?

**D:** Yep.

**B:** ...and not until then. And at that point, you'd been working in the games industry for twelve years or so?

**D:** Around that, yeah.

**B:** Let's go right back...

**D:** I'd made games since I was six or seven. Pac-Man was my origin story as far as games are concerned. I'd played board games and so on growing up, but it was video games that caught my imagination. So I always knew I would make games. And at the same time I was interested in business so I always figured: "Well, I'll have a games business." So I did computer science at university, joined a general software company on the back of that, and on the first day the managing

director there asked if anyone wanted to start their own business, and I said: "Well, I'd like a games business." Maybe not the smartest thing to do on day one of a new job but – well, he asked! But his philosophy was if anyone wanted to do that then he would help them explore that because at some point they're going to leave and do it anyway, so why not help them along the way, impart some advice and then take a stake. Fine, sounds good to me. So that was 1997 or so, and basically they funded one day a week of my time to go off and research the games industry and figure out the business plan. So I got into the games industry by starting a games company. It was as good a time as any, I suppose, that was when mobile phones were first starting to come along as potential devices, so you could do more with fewer people. Two of us co-founded that company. I could program and design and he could design and draw so that was it, it was a good match. It's difficult to think back now, but I think our initial instincts for that company are the same as mine are now, we didn't want to get too big too fast. Somewhere along the line that got lost in that first company and we ended up taking money that stretched us in too many different directions at once which is why I'm not keen on using that method at this stage.

**B:** So that company collapsed?

**D:** Yeah. Again, it was entirely work for hire. We grew on the back of work for hire. It's just not a scalable model; you wake up one day and realise you've got twelve people in the company and you think: "God, I've got to feed all these people" and you start running the treadmill to get more work and it's just a never ending cycle. We were doing a lot of work in the States, the dollar collapsed, so that wasn't great, we were being undercut anyway. And then we did a deal with a Kuwaiti mobile phone company to do the Kuwaiti royal family's favourite card game on the mobile. You know, as you do! Which was a great deal, we still had to lose a few people before that. It was going to be a great deal and then literally a month later after signing that deal, the second Gulf

War started. Everyone in Kuwait took cover, understandably. So that project, we were doing it but it wasn't really going anywhere. We did get paid but it was kind of twelve, fourteen months down the line, by which point we'd already hit the wall. So it was kind of "start again."

**B:** And was it after that you went and worked at Denki?

**D:** I worked for a company in Glasgow called Slam, which I think still exists as a shell company but it's not actively doing anything. So I worked there for three years. And then the people who founded that started another company which didn't really have a place for me, and I wasn't that interested in what they were doing, so at that point I went to Denki.

**B:** So it's been quite up and down?

**D:** Yeah, it's certainly been a rollercoaster.

**B:** Do you think that's unusual, that rollercoaster?

**D:** Not in games. In the creative industry in general that (rollercoaster) seems to be a general way of life. You have highs and you have lows and it's how you deal with them and come back again.

**B:** And what do you think it is that allows you to come back? What is it that makes you try and come back? Surely a lot of people on some more conventional trajectory, they wouldn't try, they would say: "Enough's enough."

**D:** Yeah, probably a combination of I don't really know how to do anything else...

**B:** Is that true or are you not prepared to do anything else?

**D:** Probably not. It's probably a bit of both. I don't think I'd be a very good employee for many people. I'm good in the right environment, as in Denki.

**B:** Denki I happen to know a bit about and it's hardly your standard corporate environment...

**D:** Exactly. I'd known the guys a number of years but as soon as I was in there working full-time, it was pretty clear there was a good match between the core team and myself. It was a great experience working there, I learned a lot and yeah, it's not going to be like that everywhere. Certainly a couple of the places I interviewed after leaving Denki it was pretty clear it wasn't going to be like that. I was thinking: "It's probably not what I want to do. So I'll go off and see what else is out there."

**B:** Ludometrics clearly benefits from your experience across these different models. In early times you presumably had to explain yourself and what you were doing but since you've been operating as Ludometrics, has your business model allowed you to avoid going out to explain what you do to anyone? Or have you had support? Have you had to go and explain what you do to people?

**D:** Yeah, we've had support from Creative Scotland. Channel 4 were supposed to be involved at one stage but it didn't happen in the end.

**B:** Was this around a specific project?

**D:** Yeah, it was project based, a series of games and a toolkit for building games on top of the Twitter platform. Which kind of worked, but then Twitter changed all their rules and regulations and that made it hard to figure out how you could actually build something on top of it that they couldn't just pull the plug on at any moment.

**B:** I'm interested in whether, in order to secure support, were you able to just say the sort of things you've been explaining to me, what you do? Did you have to use some other...

**D:** ... it probably helps that I'm interested in most forms of creation and I've worked on short films, so I know the guys I was working with at Creative Scotland, their background is mostly film and TV, so I can compare my work in games to my work in film, and match job descriptions and

that kind of thing, which probably helps. I don't remember doing anything, I don't remember trying to think about it in those terms at the time. That's not to say I didn't do it.

**B:** Other people have said to me that there was, specifically with Creative Scotland but also with other similar funding organisations, that there was a process of translation. They felt that even if there was an inclination to support what they thought they were doing there was a slightly strange process of translation. You haven't found that?

**D:** It's possible, but I didn't...

**B:** You're not aware of that?

**D:** I've heard other people complain about that.

**B:** If not complain, find it a challenge ...

**D:** Or have an issue with it. I think it's like all these things, if you're going to the bank for money or if you're going to an investor, you have to tweak your pitch. The core of it is going to be the same, but you're going to have to learn what they look for and what language they use and what's going to get them on the hook. If you don't do that then you are going to struggle...

**B:** No matter what?

**D:** Well, no matter who you're talking to. The same thing applies even talking to various distribution channels. We work with Big Fish Games in the US, which is three million people a day or something like that, coming through their site. And it's still about making sure you pitch the game in the right way that they're going to take it, and that's the same with all the distributors I've talked to. That's one of the problems we had at Denki with Quarrel, it (the game called Quarrel) was difficult to describe, it was difficult from a creative point of view. People would look at Quarrel in the big publishers and say, "This is amazing, love it, this is the best game I've played in years," in a way that made you believe them instead of

not being sincere. Then the sales and marketing guys would look at it and say: “I don’t know how to sell that.” So it turns out the only person who can sell something new and unique, a bit off the wall and a bit left-field are the people who create it. But because of the way things were structured with Quarrel it was difficult for us to do that without causing disturbances with external parties and so on. I think if the idea was to be done again now, it would be structured in an entirely different way.

**B:** So is part of your ability to operate the way you do now because you can directly access your audience once you’ve made your game, albeit on a modest scale?

**D:** Probably. It means it’s only ever up to you, so you can’t blame anyone else.

**B:** Do you like that?

**D:** It is what it is. I was going to say I don’t necessarily love it, but I think I much prefer being in control of my own destiny to relying on someone else and then becoming frustrated at what I see as missteps or miscalculations.

**B:** So apart from the particular project supported by Creative Scotland, you, as you put it earlier, bootstrapped the business. There’s been no other external...

**D:** Yeah, there was an initial grant from the council here (Glasgow) to help get some kit, about £1,000. That covered an iPad and half a printer or something like that. Which was useful, I’m not going to sniff at it. And then the development of this building is perfect.

**B:** David Cook (former Chief Executive of Wasps, developer of South Block) would like to hear that.

**D:** It’s the kind of space that the city’s been crying out for, and I think Scotland is probably crying out for. It’s kind of low cost, which means you’ve got a completely predictable overhead for a few years. Good coffee. And it’s just a good environment to be in.

**B:** You referred to using a pool of freelancers, and how did you acquire that pool? You’re not using different freelancers every time?

**D:** Not normally, no. It’s mostly people I’ve worked with before.

**B:** So it’s a network, you’ve built a personal network over time.

**D:** Yes, people I know can deliver and will deliver quality and they’ll do what I need them to do.

**B:** You have talked about scalability, if you continue to grow on what I understand from what you said to be a gentle path, will your use of that pool increase?

**D:** Ultimately what I would like to do is have enough of a team in-house that we don’t have to worry about finding scraps of work elsewhere. But then that’s up to me to start generating the revenue streams. Yeah, I’d be happy if we had four people on the team and we could just get to work on what we wanted to work on rather than trying to do it piecemeal, but it’s going to take time to get there.

**B:** There’s a tension then between that path and your freedom to take risks. Do you see yourself as taking risks, as it were?

**D:** I suppose so. Everything you do is a risk of some sort. It’s how you manage that. Which is why I only have one full time member of staff. I could have taken more on. It’s one of these things that frustrates me about things being measurable in the number of jobs created. I could create a hundred jobs tomorrow, I couldn’t pay anyone at the end of the month but I could create them no problem. But I want to build something stable and sustainable and something where people get to work on interesting things and they don’t have to worry about money, essentially.

**B:** That’s an interesting way of putting it – that you get to work on interesting things and you don’t have to worry about money. That’s different from saying: “If you do this you potentially make a lot of

money.” That difference suggests that the pool of people you work with have a more complex set of motivations, like you yourself, and a part of that complex is getting to work on things that they like.

**D:** That they would do anyway, I think. But the fact that they can get paid to do it is so much better!

**B:** Do you think that for the end-users of your toys, is it a better experience for them because the people creating the toys have that other kind of value system? Or not? You don’t know?

**D:** Difficult to say. I think, depending on the kind of game we made, that could make a big difference. So if we were going after, like some of the more casual players, they just want something that works and that gives them some fun for a period of time and that’s fine. But if we’re making something that we feel is going to be more appealing to someone who would consider themselves and label themselves a gamer, they’re going to be looking for different levels of production, different depths to it and they’re probably more interested in the stories behind it as well.

**B:** I hope that on another occasion we can talk in more detail about the business and barriers and so on and so forth. But to try and finish up today I would like to come back to examining what drives you; I understand from what you’re saying, that there’s a balance of things that are important to you. And judged from this conversation it would seem that from the economics side, the important outcome is to sustain your ability to live a reasonably financed life and do these interesting things. It’s that way round. Do you, in your mind, imagine a hit? Because as I understand the games business, distribution’s totally changed but it’s sort of still a hit based market, you can have a lot of things that operate at a certain level and sometimes there’s something that just...

**D:** Totally explodes, yeah.



**B:** Is that something you ever think about?

**D:** Not specifically.

**B:** So you're not sitting there making digital toys to see if you get the hit?

**D:** Not in so many words. Certainly you're always hoping that you can do something that is going to appeal to enough people that it would be considered a minor hit or a good stepping-stone. The kind of projects we've been looking at, we've been doing a pitch for the prototype funding at Abertay and looking at various sales forecasts and things like that. It seems like in the indie sector, anywhere between 50,000 and 300,000 units, you're doing well, there seems to be an average of 100,000, so above that, you're doing really well, down to about 50,000 you're still doing quite well. A game that had 50,000 sales would probably be pretty good for the business, provide quite a long 'cash cliff'.

**B:** Quite a long cash...

**D:** Cliff.

**B:** What do you mean by that?

**D:** How much ground do we have (in front of us) before we fall off? It's not about having unreasonable expectations. I mean, you look at some of the things that have happened in games recently like the CEO of Square Enix lost his job because Tomb Raider didn't sell as many as they expected, but it sold five and a half million copies, that's more than any other Tomb Raider has ever sold, so why have the expectations so ridiculously high? So for Ludometrics it's not about having grandiose ambitions. If it happens then we better figure out how to deal with it, but there's no master plan. If we can create half a dozen games which do reasonable sales, that's good enough.

**B:** You've got this extended network for want of a better name, do you think most of those people had a similar journey to you in terms of knowing from a very young age this was an area they wanted

to go into?

**D:** I think so, yeah. We're all plus or minus five years of each other, so probably all very similar, and certainly our motivations are all pretty well matched.

**B:** Okay, good, thank you very much, that was very interesting. I'm going to...

**... turns the recorder back on:**

**D:** I was going to say, I was at a games convention last month, it was pretty clear nobody knows anything.

**B:** When did William Goldman say that about the movie business?

**D:** '82 or something like that, in his book. He was talking about the movie business, not saying people are stupid, just no one knows what's going to work and what's not going to work. You can have something that's got three of the hottest stars, biggest marketing budget, best special effects, and it tanks.

**B:** That was a pre-digital comment, wasn't it?

**D:** Yeah.

**B:** Digital hasn't changed it?

**D:** No, I don't think so, it's still entertainment, it's show business, it's hard to predict. To some extent you can manufacture success, which you can see with boy-bands and girl-bands and things like that, but that's always going to be a sort of short-lived thing. For real longevity, there has to be something else behind it, but you just can't tell in advance.



# Interview 5

Hilary Grant

Conversation between Bob Last and Hilary Grant of Hilary Grant Knitwear and Textiles, at Kirsteen Stewart's studio, Kirkwall, Orkney.

11/06/2013

Hilary Grant Knitwear and Textiles  
www.hilarygrant.co.uk

**B:** I promise I am not going to ask you what is your favourite movie.

**H:** Kirsteen told me you asked her that.

**B:** Kirsteen did eventually tell me she was worried she would be judged on her answer, but I just wanted to understand a bit more about her. Anyway I'm here with Hilary Grant in Kirkwall. Could you tell me first of all a little bit about what you do and where your work is at the moment? A snapshot.

**H:** I run a knitwear label based in Birsay which is a parish in the North West of Orkney. I'm into my third trading year in business and my business operates selling wholesale and selling directly online.

**B:** Are you the designer?

**H:** I am.

**B:** Sole designer?

**H:** Yes.

**B:** So it's your vision and it's manufactured here in Orkney?

**H:** It's partly manufactured here, but most of the pieces are made with a knitwear manufacturer in the Borders in Innerleithen.

**B:** Why is that? There isn't a skills base here, or they're just more efficient?

**H:** A combination of the two things. I have a good credit system figured out with the manufacturer, but it's really because of the quantities that they can produce and the quality. The machines they use

are very different to domestic knitting machines and there are no facilities in Orkney like that.

**B:** Do you sell any of your work in Kirsteen's shop? (Kirsteen Stewart's studio space is two doors down from Hilary's Kirkwall design shop)

**H:** I do.

**B:** What sort of things do you make?

**H:** Various styles of scarves, hats, mittens, headbands and knitted collars. It's all quite small accessories. I'd like to move into garments but I think there's a lot to prepare for with that.

**B:** So you've been making accessories for three years?

**H:** Yeah.

**B:** And has the business grown in that time? Is it stable?

**H:** It's definitely grown. I feel like I've been able to carve out a bit of a profile through the marketing that I do. The sales have grown as well, especially direct sales online, but managing the cash flow is just the same struggle, really. It's a bit easier because I have more practice at figuring out what has to come, and when, and just generally more confidence with chasing up payments as well. So it's definitely easier but it's still, I think, for any business it's...

**B:** ... tough. And you make a living out of it?

**H:** I don't pull a regular wage from it, no.

**B:** So if I can ask you, how do you live?

**H:** I work in Kirsty's (Kirsteen Stewart) shop part-time. I'm looking for other kinds of teaching work. I moved here a year ago. I was based in Dundee before then. I was working at the McManus Galleries with the creative learning team and by that point I was starting to get work through the university doing ad hoc lecturing as well.

I left at quite a good time unfortunately, when there was quite a good balance between the business and the bread and butter work, which is something I need to start building up here again.

**B:** So you're doing other things so that you can pay for your time to invest in the business?

**H:** Yes, most of my income is reinvested into the business. I started off with a really small loan and a bursary from the Dundee Craftmakers Award. At that stage the (product) photography and the marketing I put out wasn't at the desirable level that I wanted it to be, so I'm upping that gradually when I can afford to.

**B:** So what would success look like?

**H:** Pulling a regular and reasonable wage from my business. I know lots of different creative businesses, architects and designers – teaching is a huge part of their income, and it's something that they use to justify having the business. So I am quite realistic about that, but I really do want to be able to make a living from this. I think it's possible. It's a case of perseverance and being quite strong-willed.

**B:** I'm sure it is. So over those three years, your sales have grown, have they?

**H:** Mm hmm, yeah.

**B:** And do you have an idea in mind as to when you would be able to take a living from it?

**H:** Thinking realistically, a regular consistent wage in about one to two years.

**B:** Right. So if you looked at the way it's grown so far, that's what that suggests?

**H:** Yeah.

**B:** But reputationally... you feel you have a good reputation?

**H:** Yeah, definitely becoming more known. It's quite difficult with your profile,

you find that becoming more well-known, that accelerates at a higher level. It doesn't match up with where you are financially. So in some ways you feel like you have more that you should be giving out, or to live up to, just in terms of the content that you put out like your (product) photography and all your marketing, and other people's expectations of how big my business is. I get sent job applications from graduates – which is quite funny. There's one thing that kind of stuck in my mind – I was speaking to a PR agent and she said to me: "I love what you guys do!" and I thought I obviously look like a bigger business so I felt quite chuffed about that. It's just me.

**B:** So you have reputational capital that is ahead of where the business is at?

**H:** Yeah, I would say so.

**B:** That's obviously a good thing, I guess? Better that way round than the other way round?

**H:** Yeah, I imagine that's normal for most fashion companies, as far as I'm aware in Scotland it's a bit smoke and mirrors.

**B:** Maybe that's normal for all creative businesses?

**H:** I guess.

**B:** Is that reputation local, is it Scotland, is it UK, is it international?

**H:** I think mostly in Scotland, not so much in Orkney because I'm still an outsider because I haven't been living here very long.

**B:** You trained in Dundee...

**H:** I did.

**B:** And what was your degree there?

**H:** It was textile design.

**B:** So there's been quite a direct link between your degree and what you've chosen to do. What brought you to work

in Orkney then?

**H:** My partner, he's from Orkney. He's an architect and he'd been working self-employed as well. Most of the clients were up here and the kind of jobs, it was sheep sheds. So he's started up a kind of business, a means of making money, he's bought a house to renovate with his dad and they're setting this up so it can be invested in like a business, an actual project. So he can start doing a bit of creative work.

**B:** So he's in a similar position to you – where what you're trying to do is just making a living out of your creativity. That's what drives you?

**H:** Yeah. Just being able to have that balance between being able to live above the headline and putting my skills to good use.

**B:** That's an interesting way of putting it, putting your skills to good use. Because for somebody from the outside looking at what you do, they would say, what's the business plan? Being able to just earn a living, from some points of view might seem like an unambitious business plan.

**H:** Yeah, I suppose it does sound quite unambitious. I do have ambitions beyond that. I think that's just the first one that I come to. I would ideally like to bring on another person to work with me because it's not an ideal situation doing everything yourself, and to be able to work with an agent on sales would be ideal. I'm not a (marketing and PR) expert, I wouldn't even say I'm an expert in knitwear because I never was able to get that kind of industry experience. So marketing and PR – very much trying to find out as much as I can, and wing it in a way as well.

**B:** I've talked to some very experienced people as part of this project and it's a consistent thing that people come up with, it seems to be if your business is about something that's also about creative work, it always involves a certain amount of winging it, or some other term for taking a leap in the dark. So what in

a dream scenario might you be doing in ten years? And I'm not asking you from a business plan point of view. Kirsteen found some of my questions uncomfortable, but part of what we're trying to do is build an understanding emotionally, as it were, why people do this. You told me that you've got part-time work; you're looking for other things in order to generate time to do this – that's actually a fairly extraordinary commitment. Someone else might say: "Why on earth are you doing that – just get a good job?" So I'm trying to find a way of reflecting back what that other thing is – that makes you do it. So what would that ten years look like?

**H:** In ten years I'd like to have an expanded collection, knitted garments, still all producing in Scotland and I would ideally like to have some staff. In ten years' time I'll be based in the mainland in Scotland again, because it's difficult being in Orkney. And I'd like to have a studio that's outwith my house. Ten years' time I'm hoping to have a really good list of regular accounts on my books with stockists. I've always had a kind of ambition with the business that I don't just want to be selling in Scotland or the UK – I want to sell to the States. I have a small handful of stockists over there but expand on that, expand on the stockists I have in Japan, and really push my sales in Australia as well – which really helps to balance out the cash flow over the year.

**B:** So you already have, even at your small scale, you have stockists internationally. What sort of proportion are they of what you...

**H:** Last year it was pretty much about a third of my sales, total sales, that includes wholesale and direct. But all the overseas customers, mostly, are wholesale.

**B:** And what sort of outlets are they? Do you know?

**H:** In New York, small independent fashion boutiques, same in Australia and in Japan, with two major department stores.

**B:** That seems quite impressive.

**H:** Yeah, I suppose it does.

**B:** I don't know enough to judge; is it quite impressive?

**H:** Well, it's always a nice feather in your cap to have stockists outwith your country – and in Japan, one of the department stores, Hankyu, is quite a renowned department store.

**B:** Yeah, I've been there.

**H:** You've been to Hankyu? I had no idea about the store before but a lot of people told me lots of good things.

**B:** And how did they come across your work?

**H:** They just found me online. I have a profile on the Textile Scotland webpage and I think that's how Hankyu found me, through that, and contacted Textile Scotland and a meeting was set up through them with the UKFT (UK Fashion and Textile Association) and I went to see them in London.

**B:** So those structures were all quite helpful then?

**H:** Definitely.

**B:** Has your reputation come from high-end fashion exposure or from your website? Where has it come from?

**H:** Mostly online. I don't really have any kind of major press in fashion magazines. I've had some press in broadsheet newspapers before but mostly in the shopping features. So nothing that seems overly significant. It wasn't a feature or anything.

**B:** There wasn't some moment that was a turning point.

**H:** No. Not one thing I could pinpoint.

**B:** Do you have a view of who your customers are?

**H:** Yeah, I think so. My products are not high-end luxury, but they're very well made. It's not someone who is looking for something that looks ostentatious, it's not buying cashmere for the sake of having cashmere, it's premium knitwear, it's made in Scotland and it's also living up to that reputation – and it's just a really practical fibre. The designs, the way I design, are not meant to be statement pieces. They're not meant to be something that stands out necessarily on its own, it's really about being wearable and different in a subtle way. So I have an idea of the kind of people that would be interested in that and of the other kinds of clothes they would buy.

**B:** I'm just being nosy at this point, but what other clothes might they buy?

**H:** Lots of, I guess, European independent designers, there's a Norwegian company called Wood Wood, a company in London called Folk Clothing, there's YMC, "You Must Create".

**B:** So those are your peers, your design peers, you would like to think?

**H:** Yeah, I would like to think, or hope that other people would see me amongst that.

**B:** Already you've talked about one of the things that I think people outside creative industries find difficult; they tend to dismiss businesses as lifestyle choices because it's clear that people are choosing to do it not just for a business reason. If I'm right in understanding you, you would not set up a business to bake cakes or something. You're only setting up the business because it allows you to do what you want to do. When you think up a new idea does it come from within a tradition?

**H:** In terms of the pattern structure and the proportion, it always references Scottish knitwear (traditions).

**B:** So when you think up an idea, how does that happen?

**H:** Just a combination of things. I don't

really switch off from seeing things or noticing things, whether interesting or beautiful, and it's difficult to do that up here anyway. You couldn't if you wanted to. But generally I'll do research that feels really conscious, like go to the library and look through books on traditional techniques or go to galleries, museums and look at ancient crafts or architectural structures. It's really hard to pinpoint. Sometimes you're just sitting in bed and feel like you have an idea and I just have to write it down before I forget the next morning or draw the pattern.

**B:** When that happens, do you have a customer in mind?

**H:** No.

**B:** You're doing it, at that point, because it pleases you in some way?

**H:** Yeah. Either what I have in mind is thinking that it would be a really cool technique to try, or it would look amazing knitted as a garment. But between that stage and thinking commercially, there's so many factors to include in between, how much it would cost to make and is it something that could be reproduced easily.

**B:** So that whole business side of working it out, that starts with a moment that isn't a business decision.

**H:** I guess, yeah.

**B:** Even if they're not engaged with the arts, people find it fairly easy to understand and accept that that an artist isn't thinking about how many people are going to come and see something; they're just having an idea – they understand that. But then once you get into the creative industries where you're producing a product which people can buy multiples of, it seems to become much more confusing, more challenging to understand how the process of creation and the business work together. Does business get in the way of what you want to do, or does it enable it?

**H:** I think it's a bit of both. There's things I would like to have produced, patterns I'd like to have samples made of, and sometimes you think: "This is really strange" or "I know how long this is going to take to knit and it'll mean it will result in a hat costing £200 so it's not worth it." But then sometimes you get opportunities to try things out. I think at first it seemed like you have these creative ideas, and then you get to this separate business world – but it's more like figuring things out, and finding ways to make things. For example, there's a few techniques in pieces I want to have made, and I have no idea if they would sell, and is there a way of getting round these problems so I can have, I guess, the satisfaction of having the piece made and designing it and trying out the sampling – without having such a big financial risk? I think it seems a bit more fluid.

**B:** The relationship between the two is fluid. You talked there about risk, which is interesting. So if I have understood you correctly, you just said that the cost of risking things could be a barrier. There are things you would like to explore and the cost of those makes it too risky for you or you simply can't fund it.

**H:** Yeah, you can't really fund the development of it at this stage.

**B:** So at the moment you're funding the development yourself by not taking a wage. Do you see yourself as taking a risk?

**H:** I don't know. In some ways I feel like having the business is a risk. I don't know if this will sound silly, but when you see other people like my peers or people the same age as me who have gotten past that stage in other fields, where they're not just on entry level wages, but they're starting to get in to substantial salaries, I'm thinking: "I'm way behind that." Will I get to the stage of thinking: "How far will I go?" Will I get the same satisfaction from it, or is there going to be a point I realise it's not enough and I may want to have the same basic securities as other people. Will I get to the point where I'm feeling a bit behind in life. It's not something

I desire just now, but if I wanted to have children that would be extremely difficult without more economic security.

**B:** It seems to me you are taking a risk, and you're taking a risk even in the way investors, normal financial investors take risks. If somebody was to support you, whether it's the government or some other structure to support or help you, let's say for example there are ideas that you would like to be able to explore more to prototype, as it were, it's maybe not the right word, what is the right word?

**H:** Sampling.

**B:** Sampling. If you were going to try to explain to someone why they should take a risk and give you the resources to do that, what would you say? Let's not think I'm playing at being a bank or somebody who will give you money, but actually really in your own terms, what would you say are the reasons why they should maybe support you doing that? Or maybe you don't think they should?

**H:** What I would be able to do with that funding would be to design something that isn't available and it would be different to everything that's on the market...

**B:** So coming back to what I was going to ask you at the beginning then, you are sort of successful at the moment?

**H:** I wouldn't want to say that. I don't really know if it is something that people can say about themselves, the meaning of the word is applied to how you think of other people. I've had moments of success where things have worked out. I've had lots of things that haven't worked out. And I've definitely progressed from where I've started. So there have been moments where you could say: "Yes, that happened and that worked out okay." I think success is something that's variable through time.

**B:** Success can mean different things at different times?

**H:** Yes – and also it's not something that

lasts. I can be successful one month and unsuccessful the next. It's just not something I like to think about very often and it's something I would associate with...

**B:** It's an uncomfortable term. But if people are going to try and find a way of encouraging people like yourself they need to understand what success might be; because success for you, from what you've said, is a little bit different from some conventional business measures of success. It's not that you need to boast.

**H:** Yeah, I suppose you could say you were a success depending on who was talking to you. If I was doing a presentation where you're expected to be speaking as this person who has achieved a certain amount, if I was asked to go to the university or pitching for investment, I wouldn't shy away from the word "success" because it's all about convincing other people. But it's not something that I would believe...

**B:** We talked earlier about what ten years on might look like. In essence you've said it's a point where you can draw a comfortable living, and have enough assistants that you could continue creating new things rather than just handle the business. I think that's what you said it would look like.

**H:** Yeah, I think having more time, more balance. I do enjoy the business side and I do enjoy working out strategy, but I suppose there's always smaller parts of it that take up time you could be using creatively.

**B:** You had a prominent piece in The Telegraph newspaper, did you see a direct business benefit from that?

**H:** Yeah. I had a lot more traffic and sales as a result of that.

**B:** Were there things that if you'd had the resources, that you could have done? We also talked about the fact that when that moment occurs, a particularly prominent bit of exposure or enhancement to your reputation, that you can't really plan

for that, you can't make that moment happen.

**H:** You can be prepared.

**B:** Were you prepared?

**H:** Yeah, I was prepared. I had the images ready at the right resolution. It was basically a 24-hour turnover between sending the image and it being in the newspaper.

**B:** You also talked about lots of people having asked you for samples, for stylists and shoots, and then it not ending up in print. Once something got a prominent bit of exposure, were there things you might have been able to do if you'd had different resources that you weren't able to do?

**H:** With press and fashion, I see that you could say if I had more money then I could send – and this is what happens with editors and even freelance writers – a box of croissants or muffins. The larger fashion companies will basically send, like Elle magazine, gifts on a daily basis; but even if I could afford it that's not something I could see myself doing. If that's what it means to have a business, then I don't want to have a business. I don't want to be sending someone free stuff all the time. I don't know if fashion journalism still has integrity, or if it did ever.

**B:** You talked a bit about how, as your reputation improved or was enhanced and you see your work endorsed and reflected back, that that reputation itself was something that you took a pleasure in, is that fair to say?

**H:** Yeah, I think so. I think when you have a job, like a normal job, and you get promoted, and that's an endorsement that you're doing something right and you're making a valid contribution, so that was my endorsement, I guess.

**B:** So that endorsement then encourages you to go on even although you're not earning a living? Do you think that's a smart decision?

**H:** I don't know if it is. I question it a lot.

I find myself always questioning the fashion industry – it's something I despise. At the same time, I love creating things and I like the idea of creating things that people can't get anywhere else, and that's maybe where the value is. I know that it takes a long time for fashion companies to get established. It's a case of: "How long can you hang in there for?" Will there become a point where the money starts to catch up with the profile and it's both equally feeding up? There's just so much investment that you need to get noticed. It all comes down to your (product) photography – it's the images that other people see, that they share and that you'll get the press from.

**B:** What might it take for the business to catch up with the reputation?

**H:** One of the big things I find is holding me back just now, in terms of wholesale sales, is being able to participate in trade shows. The trade shows are just so expensive. The cheapest stand you'll get is about £2,000. But it's going to the right trade shows, to Paris or New York where the orders are actually placed. There are a few shows in London where there's more of a commercial emphasis.

**B:** So you can't afford to risk the resources on that, or you don't have the resources at all to do that?

**H:** I did two trade shows previously. For Autumn Winter '13, I decided not to go to trade shows and to see how far I could go with contacting people directly. I think I will have to take part in the trade shows.

**B:** You talked a moment ago about where the value lies, did you mean where the value lies from your point of view in the work?

**H:** From both.

**B:** From both you and your customers' point of view? Are they quite closely aligned? Do you think customers see the same value, in some way, as you see in it?

**H:** I think so. It's maybe hard to articulate

but if you don't have a good idea of who your customer is... I see someone in the street and think: "Well, they would look great in one of my... they would be my customer." Maybe you can't articulate one kind of person but I have an idea who the people are.

**B:** They are aligned?

**H:** You could be creating something really crazy and not know who the customer is, that'd be very risky. But I kind of want the products to be accessible.

**B:** So hypothetically, if you could make a living without anyone wearing your work, that's not enough... part of what you want is not just the financial measure, you want people to enjoy your products?

**H:** Yes.

**B:** That's part of the value for you, seeing that?

**H:** Mm hmm, yeah. I definitely enjoy running the business a lot more when I get more sales online rather than getting big wholesale orders, which are great but you don't know how well it's going to sell, you don't know what pieces, you don't get the same feedback. And at the end of the season the pieces might not sell. So yeah, knowing that people want it (is part of the value).

**B:** It's interesting because at the moment, when you're not really earning a living from it, there is nonetheless a value in it for you personally because you take a pleasure in people themselves enjoying it.

**H:** Yeah.

**B:** And that matters to you?

**H:** It does. I couldn't honestly say that day-to-day it's something that you feel happy about all the time or get an enjoyment from, but yeah, it happens every so often.

**B:** Of course it's not a constant thing and these things are difficult; I have to



really probe people to get them to talk about these kind of things because it's not something that anyone just sits around thinking about. But again, if people are trying to understand how they might help people create these kinds of businesses and sustain them, if they don't understand what it is you have a value of, then it's not going to work. When I was talking to Kirsteen earlier, she was telling me a story about when she was thinking about a bank loan, an accountant turned up to give her some advice which she said nearly made her abandon the business on the spot because she felt he and the bank didn't seem to value any of the same things in the business. So that's why it was interesting when you talked about what the value is.

**H:** Yeah, I had a similar situation to Kirsteen when very early on I had a mentor. He was a really nice person personality-wise, but it wasn't a right match. He was in construction and importing kit houses. It was all numbers to him. I would get an email at the end of the month saying: "You making any money yet, Hilary?" And I'd really want to avoid replying for fear I've got to disappoint this person and he won't understand it.

**B:** My assumption about a businessman like that would be that if he didn't immediately make money out of his idea, then he would have chosen something else to import?

**H:** Possibly

**B:** Is there anything I should have asked you if I want to understand what drives you to do? What's the secret question?

**H:** I don't know. I want to do this because I feel if I didn't do it I wouldn't be able to put my creative skills to use. I've not just gone through university but worked on difficult projects that weren't always very... I feel like I've put so much into developing professionally as a creative person, that I don't want my efforts and my skills to go to waste. I feel like, in business talk you call it professional development, and personal development, I feel like I've

achieved a lot so if I decided to give up my business tomorrow I don't think I'd find a job in Scotland where I could put some of those skills to use.

**B:** Last question then. When did you first imagine doing what you're doing now?

**H:** It was when I was in third year at Art School and I had this book about designer makers. I think they were based in London and they would go to the Brick Lane, the Sunday market in the East End, and it was a design market and I thought at the time: "That looks like a really nice life. You have your job in London, and you get to go to this market in London every Sunday and sell your work." And then realised it's quite different. I always wanted to have a job that was difficult and that pushed me, I couldn't imagine having a job where you're kind of stagnant.

**B:** That's interesting. What's difficult about it? Apart from me asking difficult questions?

**H:** I think it's difficult because sometimes you have to find a way to work around how do I appear, how do I pretend to be a business that has this amount of money to invest in this area? So you're always feeling like you're sort of faking it. So that's kind of a difficult thing to do. I was never very good with finances when I was younger and it's something I've had to become, not good at, but had to be aware of it all the time. And it has to be something you just have to get involved in otherwise you don't know what's going on with your business and you won't have one. So yeah, just getting to grips with that and having to accept it's part of your day to day existence or jobs. It's difficult. But it's not so difficult now. I suppose phoning people up; I will phone up to get a contact, and it's not something that's very easy, or phoning up Fortnum and Mason to get the contact for their buyer and you know it's going to be the snootiest person on the phone and having to put on a telephone voice and thinking out what you're going to say beforehand. It sounds really silly, but it's not easy.

**B:** So the thinking up a creative idea from thin air is not the difficult bit?

**H:** No. I guess it's not a difficulty that I have on a day-to-day basis.

**B:** No is fine, it is interesting for people to understand that. If you're not in the creative industries, I don't know, but I think someone might assume that the difficult bit is thinking up the idea, but you are saying it's pretty easy to do that. It's actually the other way round?

**H:** Yeah, it's easy to have the idea and think up either a pattern or an idea for a colour way or a product or even an idea for marketing, it's just the realisation, that's the part that's tricky.



# Interview 6

Jamie Byng

Conversation between Bob Last and Jamie Byng, Publisher and Managing Director of Canongate, at the Canongate offices, Tweeddale Court, Edinburgh

21/05/2013

**B:** Jamie, I want to ask – are you successful? I know you never finish work, but all the same, when you finish work and reflect, are you successful?

**J:** Well, I'm continuing to do what I've always wanted to do so that to me is some sort of measure of success. It's about playing a very long game for me being a publisher. I was never into it to make a quick buck, sell the company and then do something else. I remember quite an epiphany after about five years of running Canongate – I think it was about '99 – that I thought: "Christ, even if it now goes belly-up, I will have been doing it long enough to not worry about that." Yet the thing that always drove me to work really hard, and do everything I could to make the business a success, was I thought I'll never again get an opportunity to do something that is quite as rewarding and as varied and as enjoyable and really inspiring as publishing. So that thing of keeping on doing what we're doing is, to me, one of the measures of success. If I look back now, since I took it over in '94, just how many different books we've published and I thought of how many authors' careers we've played a role in furthering – we're talking over the thousand book mark – and that, to me, is one measure of success. Some of those books have been more successful than others. *Life of Pi* has sold more copies than *The Book Of Lies* just up there by Mary Horlock. Both of them in their own terms are really successful books, I think, as works, as reading experiences.

**B:** I've been asking everyone that uncomfortable question because nobody wants to sit and beat their chest about being successful, but if people on the outside want to understand how these businesses and cultural enterprises work, they tend to look at external measures of

success, and what I'm trying to find out about are the internal measures. Clearly externally, Canongate appears to be successful. So that's one measure. You have suggested there are other measures.

**J:** Yeah, I think there are plenty.

**B:** Was there a point where what you're doing now, and what Canongate is doing now, was something that you think you imagined at some point in time? You talked about having an epiphany, that there was a point you thought if it all went wrong now, you'd have done something that you'd set out to do?

**J:** Yeah, felt the value.

**B:** But was there a point in time when you could have imagined where you are now?

**J:** Not exactly. I certainly thought, right from the word go, that Canongate could be not simply a traditional publishing house. The only thing I'd run before Canongate was this club *Chocolate City*. Music was a very important thing to me and was where I kind of cut my teeth, in a way, was running this club. So I'd always thought that Canongate could be a collective where there were different arms to what Canongate did of which publishing books in a conventional way was one part of it – but doing events, putting out music, getting involved in making films, whatever... What's interesting is particularly the last three years has seen an incredible convergence going on, principally because of digital that has suddenly meant that music and film and performance and printed books and all these things are kind of colliding in ways that mean that the original hope I'd had, that Canongate would end up doing all these thing things, is being fulfilled. You know, we're working with David Byrne or Gil Scott-Heron or Nick Cave or Terry Gilliam or Ray Winston, so we're working with writers and musicians and Miranda July who makes film.

**B:** So the world has caught up a bit?

**J:** Yeah. All that. Because I thought at

one stage I'd love to have a record arm that was reissuing vinyl in the way that we were reissuing the *Payback Press* and *Rebel Inc.* works by Chester Hymes and *Iceberg Slim* and *Charles Bukowski* – but it never ended up happening quite in the way that was in my head – I'd like to reissue *The Headhunters*, or whatever. But in a different kind of way, I'm now satisfying that desire to regard Canongate and publishing as not just about the printed book but about a way in which you can channel and share ideas and expressions of all sorts of knowledge through the widest prism of forms that you can.

**B:** Have you heard of this term "wild knowledge"?

**J:** No, but I immediately like it.

**B:** I thought you would like it.

**J:** Wild knowledge seems like a really good kind of knowledge.

**B:** It's something I hadn't heard of. Martin Boyce the sculptor brought it up in conversation. He's not quite sure where he first heard it. But it instinctively seems to be a very interesting fit with some of the things you're talking about. I was asking Martin not to think about the external critical value of his work, which obviously is publicly established since his *Turner Prize*, but to think about his internal measures and he talked about something very similar to you – that German term of the *zeitgeist*. He said that when he left college, he saw no difference between his art practice and a band he'd go see or a good DJ at a club. And if there was anything that was now a measure of success for him it was that he could sometimes see his work was resonating in the street, in the *zeitgeist*. It seemed to me that the pleasure he spoke of was about influence to some extent. He wasn't interested in the influence the *Turner Prize* brought him in the art world, but the idea that what he was doing was making a difference in that broader world, that seems to sort of sit with what you're saying about Canongate.

**J:** Yeah, I was always ambitious for it in that I didn't want it to stay in the shape it was. I always thought it had the opportunity to grow in lots of different ways. Now, exactly how and when it morphed was partly defined by the books that we published, with the people we work with, and it's organic – or it should be organic. I look back over the twenty years at different points and think with hindsight: "Fuck, well, doing the pocket Canons in 1998 was a kind of game-changing thing for us." We suddenly did this thing that, you know, did get us noticed internationally and also introduced pretty notable people from Nick Cave to Louis De Bernières to Doris Lessing to Bono to David Grossman. Suddenly all these people were penning introductions for us, which, if you told me five years earlier when I first took it over I would be doing this project that had all these people involved and I didn't know what the project was, I'd be thinking: "Wow, that sounds like a pretty interesting project!" I was starting to realise that vision that we're conduits, a catalyst for bringing together interesting combinations of creative people. Going back to how do I measure success, the financial stuff which is clearly one measure of it – thankfully the investors in Canongate have got their investments back five times over, four times over in dividends already, and they're sitting on something that's worth a lot more than when they invested in. I think of the kind of roster of talent and the intellectual property that's being brought together, when you add it all up – whether it's Obama or The Mighty Boosh or Nick Cave or Yann Martel or Michel Faber or David Byrne – this is starting to create a kind of incredible hot-bed of ideas, of quite subversive, exciting and challenging voices coming together, to me that is one of the great measures of success... That, to me, is ultimately where the value and the cultural success of Canongate lies, in the creative people it's brought together under one roof, and I think we're just at the beginning of that as well, which is exciting.

**B:** You used the term 'morph' which I think is a process a lot of the people that I've spoken to would recognise, and I certainly recognise. Morphing seems to be essential

to everybody. It's not a normal business planning term but it seems to be a matter of common sense within the cultural economy...

**J:** Yeah, it's how things actually happen.

**B:** You talked about the Pocket Canons as a transforming moment, it clearly didn't happen by accident but it wasn't something you could have sat down and foreseen as part of a plan.

**J:** We could not have said three years on we're going to do these because we hadn't had an idea. But the fact is in 1995 we launched Payback, in '97 or the end of '96 we launched Rebel Inc. and both of those imprints were publishing reprints and we were making old text relevant to a modern audience by commissioning contemporary introductions. And that's really all Pocket Canons was, it was just doing it with one of the oldest texts, The Bible, and with even more high profile introducers, and so it was scaled in a way that was beyond simply getting Ice-T to introduce Iceberg Slim's Pimp, it was doing something more ambitious. But we'd never have had the idea for the Pocket Canons if we hadn't done those...

**B:** ...because you were on a journey of discovery...

**J:** ...and that led to the Myths, so everything is connected and I think that sense of context is really crucial for everything we do. Nothing happens randomly, it really doesn't. The principal reason that Yann Martel was published here was because I was in New York having lunch with this woman who had inherited Michel Faber – she had acquired Under The Skin, his first novel – she called me four weeks before I was going to New York saying: "I'm Patsy, I'm thrilled to have inherited Michel Faber, I love Under The Skin, is he doing anything? What's he working on now?" And I start telling her about The Crimson Petal. But I said: "Look, I'm going to be in New York in a few weeks, why don't I come and tell you about it?" And then she tells me during this lunch, "God, as Michel's publisher you should check out this book I've pre-

empted yesterday, the US rights..." And publishing Michel, that's because we're based in Edinburgh and his first story I read was in the Macallan Scotland on Sunday short story competition. His story, Fish – I like the serendipitous way lots of things happen. We do plan more ahead now than we did in my first few years, or possibly ten years.

**B:** Is that just because at a certain scale you have to?

**J:** I think so, also because you want to. As the business matures, our overheads now are completely different from what they were when I took over Canongate, and also we prefer to because it's nice to be able to build things. We've always planned ahead; something like the Myths series I started working on in 1999 and didn't launch until 2005 so that was kind of six years in its gestation.

**B:** So there's a sort of stability?

**J:** Yes, a stability, we can afford it. We invest a lot of money in future projects and that's the way it needs to be if we're going to attract the sorts of things we want and also hold onto the key authors we're trying to develop and are working with.

**B:** You talked about Canongate being a conduit, which is an interesting term to use.

**J:** I've always seen this analogy between what a DJ does and what a publisher does, in that sense you're also a conduit. You're working with artists and you are the go-between and you're the tastemaker and selector that is taking work by people who tend not to have power or want to particularly market their own work or whatever. They're the pure creative people; I'm not saying all artists are like that, but generalising. We are also playing a creative role in that we're editing and designing, but setting all that aside we are the channel through which we take a writer's work and get people talking about it and literally distribute it both digitally and physically around the world. And I suppose that role as a conduit is a

simplistic way, but a very accurate way, of describing what we do. I always like to compare to the DJ because it's that same thing, there's a DJ, what are you going to play next? It's like what are you going to publish next?

**B:** It's certainly a construction that I recognise. From my own practice, when I look back, especially on a number of occasions you find yourself having done something that took on some significance beyond what was expected, it is a kind of channeling. You end up looking back and actually that's what you're doing, channeling something, being a conduit, and I think the DJ is an interesting model because the DJ is using somebody else's work that has already been made, but doing something else with it – or introducing it to others...

**J:** Representing it.

**B:** Representing and using. So because you are a tastemaker, let's say Canongate, not you personally, but the company is a tastemaker – you take creative decisions then, don't you? And you have an influence back on that context you talked about. You talked about context being very important, there are decisions that Canongate take that also shape context.

**J:** Yeah, we're in part feeding into the culture that we're all part of by saying: "This is what people are thinking right now: this is the way people are expressing their dissatisfaction with the world as they see it or their joy with the world as they see it, or their understanding of what is going on in people's heads." Our list is incredibly broad now. It goes from publishing neuroscientists to politicians to historians to moral philosophers to novelists and musicians.

**B:** Canongate the brand is known for certain authors but if you look at it and try and think what's particularly distinctive about Canongate the brand, it is its eclectic introduction of thinking in other areas that somehow feels to people to be of the same world as your fiction authors. In some way, that's why you have an

identifiable brand, isn't it?

**J:** I'm not quite sure but perhaps. Certainly we often think about what makes a Canongate book because it's a thing that I would kind of fear diluting; this idea that we did things that didn't feel like they had a certain degree of originality or attitude or integrity or style or quality. But within that you can do everything from reissuing Willie McIlvanney's *Laidlaw* or publishing James Meek's new novel or publishing Daniel Pink's book on *To Sell Is Human*. We just don't really care on one level, but the paradox is that we care enormously.

**B:** It is a paradox, isn't it?

**J:** ...and that goes back to the paradox of success, we don't give a shit about our books actually selling lots of copies because that's not the reason we're publishing but at the same time we're absolutely determined to do as best as we possibly can for our authors and their books. And that to me is the joy of a creative industry, that you are always caught between not purity, but integrity of the decision-making combined with the commercial marketplace into which that work has to sit or operate within.

**B:** So that paradox is at the heart of the creative industries? Was it F. Scott Fitzgerald, who had that quote about the sign of real intelligence being the ability to hold onto two opposing ideas at the same time?

**J:** Yeah. I think it is Fitzgerald that said that. It's a great line and I remember hearing that thinking: "Hang on."

**B:** You're suggesting that that paradox is at the heart of energising what you do?

**J:** Yeah, I think it's on that cusp that the real joy and excitement of what we do comes alive. Margaret Atwood gave me this book by Louis Hyde called *The Gift* and she told me: "It's one of my favourite books ever written, I've probably given more copies of this book away than any other book," and I was like: "Fuck, that must be a great book." And we ended up

reissuing it in 2008 and prior to publication had these incredible quotes from David Foster Wallace and Jeff Dyer and Zadie Smith and Jonathan Lethem, all of whom, with the exception of Foster Wallace, had never come across the book before, and that book delves right into that very paradox, the fact that there are these two economies that cross over one another but the gift economy is much, much older than the market economy and all art, all creative industries insist upon the gift economy first and foremost. And you have to recognise that while also recognising and respecting there's this market economy without which people struggle to live and certain things don't get made. How do you put a value on art is one of the questions at the very heart of this book. If you haven't got it I'll give you one before you go because *The Gift* is a phenomenally important book... guys at Burning Man started the festival because of the book, Bill Viola is obsessed by *The Gift*, there's loads of artists for whom it's a touchstone work.

**B:** I'll read it. So in a sense, something being a Canongate book embodies that paradox? Canongate is big enough now that I guess you have a team who recognise whether or not something is a Canongate book?

**J:** Yeah. There's Jenny who is Associate Publisher, she's been with me since '05. Francis who is Publishing Director has been here since 2000. We've got a brilliant Senior Editor called Jenny Law and she's been here two years and Jenny got it even before she joined, she had an instinctive sense, and it's partly why she wanted to join because she saw the books we published.

**B:** I'm quite sure that you know very clearly whether something is a Canongate book or not...

**J:** Yeah. I know it within pages. Whether it then works... is a different matter. But I know pretty early on, within twenty pages, whether it's something for us in terms of the voice or the language or the

way words are being used. Sometimes we do buy books on proposal and sometimes the thing doesn't quite deliver on what you hoped it might be, it doesn't mean it's a bad book, it's just not as good as it might have been, which is just what happens occasionally. But no, the reason that I like the idea that I instinctively know what a Canongate book is, is that it's a pretty broad canvas in which we publish too, it's not as if we just publish books about local history or something. We have this incredibly broad canvas so it kind of means we can publish what the fuck we like, as long as it's challenging in some way and as long as it's doing something that we don't think's been done before, or doing it better than anyone else.

**B:** It's partly because you have such a broad canvas that it is so interesting to try and figure out what it is that makes it distinctive.

**J:** Of course we are aware of the market and when we have acquisition we have meetings, we think about books in relation to comparable titles and how might we position it and stuff like that.

**B:** The strategic thinking.

**J:** The strategic thinking, but we're not publishing for the market, we don't give a fuck about the market. What we care about is the book and whether the book is actually saying something worth saying and whether we want to spend six hours reading a book. That was always my guiding principal as a DJ – if I wanted to dance to this track or listen to it then I might play it. If I didn't want to listen to it from beginning to end, no fucking chance, I'm not going to play it because I think someone else might like it. We've got to like it. So it's passion-driven, personal, it's very personal. It's like everything comes out of this publishing house is stamped with real personality because it's for personal reasons we're putting it out there.

**B:** Which is interesting because...

**J:** It's very emotional.

**B:** It's an emotional thing. Stephen Marshall, Dewar's Global Marketing Manager, who I talked to because his name kept cropping up all over the place, it was incredible, I'd never heard of the guy.

**J:** I want to meet him now you've told me about him. He sounds great to hatch up some project.

**B:** Yeah, definitely, we will have a drink and arrange that. But it was quite difficult to get him to 'fess up how he explained himself to his paymasters, how he explained some very valuable voodoo. What he said was that by making these things happen, even though they weren't being overtly branded, he was delivering emotional content to the brand. That was the essence of his activity, which I thought was very interesting because it is an emotional thing but from any sort of policy sort of view emotion is quite...

**J:** Powerful.

**B:** Powerful, but also quite difficult from a policy point of view... it's as if all of these companies, people, are creating a collective capital that everyone can use. It's having a benefit for your investors but it is also creating a collective value that other people can use?

**J:** I see that. When I started this, I had this idea to do this thing World Book Night, because what is increasingly important to me more than anything is that people read, and I don't honestly care whether people read Canongate books, of course...

**B:** You think they should but...

**J:** I think we publish some great books, what I care is also that people read books, they come out the other side having felt that this is a journey that they were glad they went on because if you have got something out of it, and if it's rewarding they're more likely to go on another journey and be taken to someone else's head, and empathise with another whole group of characters and people who are not them. So I've become increasingly

evangelical about what the actual experience of reading does, and it's got me thinking more and more about what matters most about what I'm doing as a person right now on this planet. I think of course I have a responsibility to Canongate, all the staff that work with me here, the shareholders, to the degree that I can have an influence on it to keep it running and continuing to do great work or what we think is great work. But I'm also interested in just broader questions to do with education, to do with people's literacy, to do with the way people are actually enabled and empowered through books to change their lives because that's what I think books do, that they genuinely transform people's ability to understand the world. So when World Book Night was hatched up, which was a very simple idea on one level, but quite a big scale idea, this idea of a million books into a million people's hands in one night. It actually wasn't that difficult for me to persuade the relevant people in terms of all the big publishers, the authors, the agents, the biggest printer in the country to just say: "Fuck's sake, why can't we do this?" It's only going to cost us two hundred grand to print the books. And if we can't, between us, pull together to do something like this, what kind of an industry are we in? And we've just done the third year of it. To me, that is maybe more important than anything I've done as a book publisher, pulling something like that together, seeing what that's doing with 2,500 libraries involved, over a thousand bookshops and the thing's now happening in America. So I just care, more than anything, about people reading and I suppose the success of something you've done can be partly measured by just one conversation you have with someone who has been completely altered by something that you helped bring into their life one way or another. That's important to remember as well as... it could have changed the very course of their life and you never know what they're then going to go on and do as a result of it. I think that's really important to remember, the incredibly microscopic things to an outsider can have colossal impacts on an individual's life. And that individual

can have a colossal impact on a whole different thing – you just don't know what you're setting in motion.

**B:** It's an overused word, but there's an ecosystem in the cultural economy. What we've learned about ecosystems in the biological world is that very small things can have massive impacts and so in that sense, ecosystem is quite a good analogy for the way what you are describing works.

**J:** Well, Google is just a classic example. Look where Google started from and now just think the degree to which everyone in the world, pretty much, is plugged into Google whether they like it or not. And that's something that's started off as this tiny thing, it was an idea to begin with.

**B:** Did you always have external investors?

**J:** No, well, we don't really have any external investors, we just have me, my stepfather, my ex-father-in-law and my ex-wife, we've never needed to...

**B:** Never gone on that whole roadshow thing for private equity?

**J:** Thankfully never needed to, the total equity investment is like eight hundred grand, that's all we've put into it over the twenty years. And we've just got lucky at certain points; first of all we bought it quite cheap, the business from the receivers, and then just grew it organically. We weren't trying to pursue any massive expansion plans, which is when you sometimes need to raise capital.

**B:** Is that actually part and parcel of being able to keep it such a distinctive brand? The fact that you've grown organically in that way?

**J:** I certainly think it's helped. When I was beginning I forgot to say something that was kind of relevant to this; I suppose I realised one way of measuring success for me was a further enhancement of our independence. It really happened in a big way with Pi, because suddenly we were sitting on a lot of cash for the first

time. We'd been pretty hand to mouth for the first six, seven years. You know, we'd been growing the business slowly but thankfully we had a generous bank. Until we had that hit we were always in overdraft, certainly it was a bit tense with the gearing on the business, blah, blah, blah. When we suddenly had a lot of money I thought: "Fuck, now we are actually independent: for the first time." We are truly independent and now's when we'll start to get away with more dangerous and interesting and exciting things than when you are hand to mouth, just scraping along, unable to plan further ahead, unable to invest in the projects you'd like to, when you can't buy some of the things you would like to. And that financial freedom has been one of the huge liberating factors, for me, which is one of the consequences of success that's enabled me to grow the business in ways that I think make it more exciting and, for me, richer as a business.

**B:** A number of people I've talked to come back to that notion of freedom being part of their measure of success. Okay, is there anything else I should have asked you about? Have I missed something about really what it is that drives Canongate or you to do this?

**J:** I think what really drives me, I suppose, is a love of stories and a love of what one person's view can do to another person's view.

**B:** So if you really boiled it down then, it's about influence, isn't it?

**J:** Yeah, shaping someone else's sense of the world, and my (own) sense of the world is being transformed by hundreds and thousands of different writers and artists and musicians in ways I can only kind of be grateful for, and delighted about. That sense of recognising there is no self, you are simply a construct of experiences and therefore the more different experiences that you can have and the more good experiences you have the more enlightened ways of seeing the world you can have. As a publishing house, that is what your responsibility is, to gather as many of those different ways of seeing

the world, and they can be contradictory. Canongate turns forty this year and we're creating this quite cool little book where we've got various people we've worked with over the years to interpret the word "forty" in one way or another, David Shrigley and Margaret Atwood and Noel Fielding have all done drawings and other people have written, Pullman's written this brilliant thing about Ali Baba. On the back of it we've got this lovely Walt Whitman quote: "Do I contradict myself? Very well, then I contradict myself, I am large, I contain multitudes." We put it on the catalogue about ten years ago and I always loved that idea of contradiction and of containing multitudes. We all contain multitudes and I think it's a question of kind of enriching the things that are going into people's heads.

**B:** ... and influence is sort of the wrong term, because influence carries with it some sense of...

**J:** Control ...

**B:** ...control. It's not about that, but rather what's reflected back to you. The reflection back is that you have impacted people.

**J:** Yeah, you've nourished them and you've fed them in ways.

**B:** If I understand what you're saying, the value of that for you is because you know in your own life the significance of when you encounter some input that makes a difference.

**J:** It was like working with Gil Scott-Heron. He was someone whose understanding of the world and what it means to be human, and his incredibly sophisticated understanding of how society works, how the heart works as well as how politics and the economy works, someone of very sophisticated mind (who) was able to share through both his music and his lyrics and his written work an incredible understanding of what is really going on. There's so much fog and obfuscation in the world and



there's so much crap talked that when you can find these kind of voices that cut through it, they're the ones who you need to be celebrating and championing – people who are illuminating the world rather than shrouding it. That's what, I suppose, we're all about, trying to create a collective of voices that are trying to throw light onto the world.

**B:** Okay, that's a good point to stop then. Thank you very much for your time.

**J:** It's just a pleasure, so nice to see you.



# Interview 7

Kirsteen Stewart

Conversation between Bob Last and Kirsteen Stewart in her workshop in Kirkwall, Orkney.

11/06/2013

*Based in a studio and shop in Scotland and selling worldwide, Kirsteen designs and sells a range of accessories and clothing made in collaboration with UK and international fairtrade makers.*

[www.kirsteenstewart.com](http://www.kirsteenstewart.com)  
[www.studioshoporkney.com](http://www.studioshoporkney.com)

**B:** I want to ask you – are you successful?

**K:** How do you measure success? That's a tricky question.

**B:** I'm not asking you if you are successful against anybody else's measure.

**K:** How do I feel? Am I successful?

**B:** Yes.

**K:** I feel I'm getting there. There are a lot of things I still want to achieve. That's a tough question.

**B:** It is interesting that you immediately questioned "in what terms?" I'm really interested in understanding in what terms would you would judge yourself as successful?

**K:** So far I've achieved everything that I've set out to. I've set my goals and I've reached those goals. I keep extending the goals so that I can reach for new ones.

**B:** And what are those goals?

**K:** I started off working on the kitchen table. I was working part-time in another retail premises. So when I started working full-time for myself, that was a great achievement. Producing a small range of products that I created myself, manufactured myself...

**B:** Clothing or accessories or both?

**K:** Accessories mainly. I was selling those wholesale and retail at retail events, fairs and things like that. And then I moved into a studio with a friend who is a self-employed illustrator. And that was the next step – getting to our own premises. And from there I moved into a shared shop premises and realised that retail is a real passion of mine. So I had this shop in my sights for quite some time, and moved in four years ago.

**B:** So the shop is not just a tool, the shop is something that you do because you want to?

**K:** Yes. I enjoy the retail side.

**B:** I'm sorry if this feels like an interrogation! I'm asking about things that you do not often have to express. From a policy-making point of view, if policy ignores what really drives people, it may not work – so that's why I'm pushing you for answers. So when you started on a kitchen table and made that progression, was the goal solely an economic one? Was it: "I want to make and sell more of these things?"

**K:** Not just that. It's a lifestyle choice as well. I chose to come back to Orkney and start my business, which some people didn't think would be the best idea, but I wanted to live here. I like travelling, but I want my base to be in Orkney. I think that's a different side that's not really measured, certainly not in terms of accountants, bank managers.

**B:** From a conventional economic investment point of view, someone making a lifestyle choice is seen as a problem rather than an asset. So part of your measure was: could you make a living, or profit, or grow a business from a specific place?

**K:** Initially the question was, could I grow a business from here? Now more and more (the measure) is profit, turnover, as I try to expand and push forward, even though it wasn't the reason I started.

**B:** What was the reason you started? Were you ever aware of a reason?

**K:** I always had a burning ambition to have my own business.

**B:** Could it have been any kind of business?

**K:** Well, no. It had to be producing something that was then for sale. I started that in school with a card-making company. It was always in me, I think.

**B:** Were you studying art in school?

**K:** No. I didn't take art at all. I had an art teacher who convinced me I couldn't draw. I studied a lot of other subjects. I was going to be in tourism and then I worked for Ingrid Tate, who runs the accessories company Tate and Style, and I realised that I really enjoyed the design side. I went back to Orkney College and I took a portfolio course and then went and studied textiles and fashion from there.

**B:** So when you said you always had this ambition to have your own business making something to sell, theoretically that could have been anything? Making pies?

**K:** No. It had to be something with pattern, with clothing, material. Looking back all my part-time jobs were for self-employed people, from Ingrid (Tate and Style) to the chip shop, the newsagent, all these people ran their own businesses, so maybe that's why it was always in my mind to have my own business, because that's what I knew.

**B:** But it was always going to be about design in some way?

**K:** Yeah, I loved clothes and fashion, more so than cards – that was just something I knew I could produce at that time because I had the skills to do that. And as I went on, and went further, I knew I could produce other things.

**B:** I don't mean to be rude, but this dress you're wearing today, is that one of...

**K:** No, it's not today.

**B:** What is that?

**K:** This one is one I bought recently from another company.

**B:** Here?

**K:** No, but I'm always seeking out new brands and new styles for the shop.

**B:** For Orkney, what you're wearing is a fairly bold statement, I would say. Is that the case?

**K:** Probably. I suppose in Orkney it is.

**B:** So in terms of your creative design work, apart from your lifestyle choice to be in Orkney, could you do it anywhere else? In theory could you do it anywhere else? Or is there something specific to Orkney?

**K:** In theory I could do it anywhere, but I would probably be drawn to working close to my family. The support of my family has helped my business grow.

**B:** That's interesting because Sheila Fleet, who I was talking to yesterday, talked about family a lot. And I've talked to lots of people elsewhere and I don't think family's come up, but when I come here, family comes up consistently. Which suggests there's a slightly different social fabric. You talked about business from the start, and then slightly reluctantly you talked about design being what you wanted to do. Is there something you wouldn't do to help grow the business? If an investor came and said: "Look, here's a load of money, we'll buy out the business, we can manufacture it all somewhere else on a much bigger scale, we'll market it, we'll pay you to carry on being the ambassador for the brand," would you do that?

**K:** I would be open to the idea. I feel that I've learnt a lot about business and the more I learn, the more interested I become in the business side of things. That's something that's really gripped me.

**B:** So that entrepreneurial side is something that drives you?

**K:** Yes, I've helped quite a few friends, who have started their own businesses, write up their business plan and that just really inspires me. I can see that as a skill that I've learned that can be adapted.

**B:** That's interesting, that's also quite unusual. Often people, whether it's in the arts or the creative industries, are slightly uncomfortable with that business side. They see it as an issue of compromise or something... but for you, that's not...

**K:** No.

**B:** It doesn't arise.

**K:** No. I think I would always be interested and always on the lookout to learn more. I don't think you should be blinkered and shut yourself off from possibilities.

**B:** In terms of the stuff that you sell in the shop, is it all from your own design studio?

**K:** I stock other brands. My design range is quite small, and I've identified my customer market for the shop as being different to my customer market for my own products. When I took a bigger shop, I realised I needed to stock a wide range so that it was suitable for all the types of customers that I would have through the door.

**B:** And how would you distinguish the customers for your own design brand?

**K:** The local customer base is very supportive but some of my products are out of their price range, or they compare them to other products and they're more expensive – so I'm looking to progress that side of my business in other areas.

**B:** Which side of your business?

**K:** The wholesale and retail side of my own products.

**B:** Is it just about price point?

**K:** I think it's about price point, and design. For example, I sell in Japan and I think they're much more design-led, design aware, and a lot of the designs can be unisex; the knitwear ranges that I create can be worn by both men and women. That wouldn't happen so much here – they'd be standing out.

**B:** How did you make that Japanese connection from Kirkwall?

**K:** It happened by chance. I was taking part in a retail show in London and they're partnered with a show in Japan. They sent out an email saying: "If you'd like to apply to attend, or your stock to attend." And I did, and that's kind of how it happened.

**B:** So it was chance, but it was also an encounter that you made happen?

**K:** Yes.

**B:** How long have you been set up as a business?

**K:** Since 2007.

**B:** And when did you start the shop?

**K:** I had this shop in 2009. Previously I had another smaller premises for a year and a half. It happened quite quickly because there was an empty shop premises, and my friend and I were asked to create a pop-up shop in the run up to Christmas – and that's how it started.

**B:** Who asked you to do that?

**K:** My accountant set it up. She's involved in the regeneration of Kirkwall and the Kirkwall Town Bids which I'm also involved in.

**B:** What's that?

**K:** It's working together with all the businesses and retailers in Kirkwall to really increase footfall, get people back in the street, just so we don't end up as another empty town centre with Tesco and other shops outwith.

**B:** So that sort of goes back to this sense of community and family.

**K:** Mm hmm.

**B:** During that time period has the business grown smoothly?

**K:** No, there have been lots of highs and lows and learning curves – mainly because I didn't have all the experience and knowledge at that beginning.

**B:** Can you tell me about a high and a low, as an example?

**K:** Highs, there's been a lot, getting the keys to the door.

**B:** It's a really funny thing, everybody finds it much more difficult to talk about good things, as with talking about success. Whereas if I ask: "What are the problems, what are the challenges?"

**K:** We were talking about this the other day in relation to the shop. I can remember every negative comment in my head, but the good ones you just take them and move on. I have started to paste up thank you letters, or nice comments, on the back wall. I don't know why it's easy to hold onto the negative. I'd far rather push that out.

**B:** I think it's partly a cultural Scottish thing.

**K:** Yeah.

**B:** I spend quite a bit of time in California and that's definitely not a problem there.

**K:** No, I bet. They've got the sun.

**B:** Maybe it's a weather related thing...

**K:** I think you don't want to get too big-headed.

**B:** But it's not been a straightforward process...

**K:** No I don't think so. There have been a lot of highs and lows. Probably the highs have been if I've been accepted to a show

that I'd really like to go to or, for example, meeting Prince Charles and Camilla when they came up to Orkney and she bought one of my tops. Things like that.

**B:** One of the tops from your own brand?

**K:** Yeah. Just somebody being pleased or thankful for the work or the service provided.

**B:** So if you look at the business was there a point back in time where you imagined it as it is now?

**K:** Yes, but it's not quite how I imagined it to be.

**B:** When do you think that earliest point was, where what you're doing now was something that you imagined might be?

**K:** Probably around the time I was finishing uni, I would say.

**B:** So that was how many years ago?

**K:** Five.

**B:** So if I asked you lots of awkward questions then about positive stuff that you found painful to answer, you would have been able to say: "What I want to do is have my own brand that I'm selling internationally and have a shop at home in Kirkwall?"

**K:** I would have probably said 'yes' to the first bit. I don't think I really knew how linked I was to retail at that stage – although I might have been cocky and said I'd like to have shops all over the world.

**B:** The reason I'm asking that question is this: I have encountered people outside the creative industries and arts and crafts being dismissive of lifestyle choices, but it's possible that peoples' lifestyle choices are a part of what makes the businesses distinct and successful, rather than a problem. The other thing of course is that they're always looking for some plan; you need to have a spreadsheet and say: "Well, this is what we're planning on doing," whereas I'm finding when talking

to people that although they have a vision, it doesn't necessarily translate into a straightforward plan. And in your case, for example, it seems that there's been quite a lot of zigzags because if you'd have thought about a shop, you would have thought about a shop that was related to your own brand, not a shop that was getting as much interest from other stuff.

**K:** Yeah, yeah.

**B:** So you couldn't have laid out...

**K:** No, of course.

**B:** Or if you'd laid out a business plan at an early point it wouldn't have looked like where you are now?

**K:** No, I've redone my business plans numerous times, and if I look back at starting off, I think it would have been quite funny. It's a case of what comes along to you and the skills that you learn, or the experiences that you have, as well.

**B:** What will the next step be?

**K:** For my business? Well, at the moment I've got Verity working for me, sorry, I didn't really introduce you earlier, and Megan. Verity's here through Adopt An Intern on a four month placement, and Megan's a student – she's working throughout the summer. I didn't realise how much we would get done with all the people here – it's amazing what can be achieved! So for me, the next step is employing more staff and really getting back to the design side myself, and growing that side of my business because the shop really took over.

**B:** So why are you getting back into the design side?

**K:** Because that's the bit I loved at the start, and feeling like I've been losing.

**B:** Now we finally get an answer to my first question, which is, actually, ultimately that it's an important driver to you personally. I mean I'm not your bank

manager here checking whether you care about business!

**K:** Good! Yeah, design is the passion and the drive.

**B:** So are your customers somehow buying that passion and drive, or is it just something that's you derive pleasure from – or is it related to the business?

**K:** I think it's related to the business.

**B:** It's not something outside the business?

**K:** No, it's part and parcel of the business. I think customers are inspired by it or they enjoy it. They want to buy into it for lots of different reasons.

**B:** Are they inspired by it, or do they enjoy it? Is that an intuitive thing that they pick up on? Can you measure that? You're sort of saying – if I understand what you're saying – that the love and passion you have for the design side is in some way connected to your customers. Is that directly reflected in the design or do they put a value, somehow, on that commitment that you have?

**K:** I think that it's reflected in the design, or I hope it is, or it's going to be. I'm not quite sure about that one, that's a tough question.

**B:** This is really difficult stuff for everyone to talk about. When I was talking to Martin Boyce the sculptor, he found it easier to articulate – perhaps because if you work in the fine art world, you're more used to thinking about, and having to articulate these things – whereas in the world you're working in, it's perfectly possible to measure it by numbers. "We're selling more, therefore it's good."

**K:** Yeah, and I think that's the language I've got used to speaking.

**B:** I'm interested in these awkward questions because I wonder if you just pursued that business of numbers and lost the other side, whether that would

matter?

**K:** It would matter to me, and it also would be reflected in the products. For example, if I got somebody else in to design and create, then the business would completely alter.

**B:** If the shop took over all of your time, and you could no longer do your own work, would that be a successful outcome for you?

**K:** No. And that could easily happen. I would not be satisfied or feel successful.

**B:** To me that's a very interesting decision that you're taking there – because, again, I can understand why that's a good decision. But from a conventional business point of view, someone might say that's a little crazy because you've discovered you can do this retail thing so why would you not just push that as far as it could go?

**K:** Yeah, and people have said that.

**B:** Who has said that?

**K:** My Prince's Trust mentor felt I was trying to do far too many things, and he asked me: "What do you see yourself as – a businesswoman, a designer, an entrepreneur, a retailer, or a buyer?" And I said: "All those things. Why can't I be?" As much as I enjoy the retail side, I couldn't solely do that because I wouldn't have a creative outlet. And I would be quite frustrated because I would see all these beautiful products coming in from all these other companies and know the designers from these companies.

**B:** And want to be making some beautiful products yourself?

**K:** It's not necessarily about making the product either. I work with some manufacturers that create it for me. It's not so much the making side for me – it's the design.

**B:** Imagining it?

**K:** Yeah, and seeing your drawing become a 3-D piece of work.

**B:** I think it is interesting because it seems that the kind of decision you're taking is not an uncommon one. Just thinking, talking to Sheila (Fleet) last night, she's had opportunities where people have come and wanted to buy her out and scale it up and she feels it would lose something. So she's at times made decisions which might not seem to be straightforward economic decisions. And it seems to be a very common characteristic of the world. One of the things we're thinking about is the way all these small businesses are a kind of ecosystem which has balances, and that maybe policy makers – instead of always looking for people to grow and mono-focus and have an economic measure – that they need to look to support that kind of sustainable and changing model because, from what you say, you might change the balance again. You might rebalance what you do.

**K:** Well, going back to your original question, I'd be open to the idea of somebody coming in and suggesting that they wanted to buy me out. I think I've set up the shop in that way because I can see myself in the future detaching from the shop, but maybe going back. I would still want to keep control of the design. That's why it's become two separate businesses, which is different to Sheila's shop (Sheila Fleet Jewellery) because the majority of her stock is her product, whereas mine is a smaller proportion.

**B:** So on the design side of things, how do you think of an idea?

**K:** I'm always collecting things – magazine tear-outs, or taking photographs with my phone, you know, things that inspire me. For me, it's really about surface design so I'm always looking for patterns – it can be anywhere, even manhole covers! I seem a bit obsessed with them at the moment. I collect lots of bits and pieces and keep a notebook of lots of little sketchy drawings and things, and work from there.

**B:** Is there a point in that process where

you have a customer in mind?

**K:** No.

**B:** So at that stage, it's for yourself?

**K:** It's what inspires me, yep.

**B:** Do you judge it in terms of it's something you would potentially want to wear, or it's just what interests you?

**K:** It's just I can see it as a surface design, a repeat print or a placement print.

**B:** Is that measurable?

**K:** I can measure how happy it makes me.

**B:** Right, that's how it's measurable?

**K:** Yeah, because I feel motivated, inspired. If I see something I really like, it fires me up, I guess.

**B:** So your brand is about those intuitive decisions?

**K:** Mm hmmm. I think so. Although I would say I'm also influenced by trends that are coming through as well, or maybe particular colours. You'd maybe see that more so in the end product, and that's after thinking about the surface design or researching something, whether it's Moroccan tiles or something like that. There's the original inspiration and then there's an area when I'm thinking about the product and the customer at that point.

**B:** So at some point then the measure of success of a design is how many you sell?

**K:** Mm hmm. Or how much I like it. And that is sometimes the test of it.

**B:** So sometimes the customers are wrong?

**K:** No, I wouldn't...

**B:** But it's an interesting thing because...

**K:** Maybe the customers aren't ready

for it yet. Or you're not finding the right customer base for it.

**B:** One of the people I talked to is a guy who has a games company called Ludometrics; he calls himself a digital toy company. All he does is computer games and in his mind he's making toys that happen to be digital. But I was asking him about user market research and user testing and he was very clear, he doesn't do it. He said: "Why would I do it? Because obviously they don't know what they want. The point of me and my business is to imagine something. There's no point in asking what they want because they'll tell me they want something that is already there." He was very, very clear about that, and I was a bit surprised because that goes against all the conventional business idea of market research and things. But that's sort of the same thing you're saying, in a way. You're not saying the customer is wrong but you are saying there's a possibility that they don't know they want it yet.

**K:** Yeah, I like that idea. And I guess when I'm thinking of a customer, I would see how they wore it or what they would wear it with. That's quite interesting, I like that. They don't know they need it yet.

**B:** Have you had support from various organisations?

**K:** Initially HIE (Highlands and Islands Enterprise) and that was a start-up grant of £1,000. And then I had business mentoring from Prince's Trust and I continue to work with the Prince's Trust in different ways. And then I took Starter For 6 and now Fashion Foundry (Cultural Enterprise Office programmes), and I've definitely needed them at that time.

**B:** If you took all of that away, do you think you would have done what you've done?

**K:** No.

**B:** I think you might have done, actually!

**K:** It would take me a lot longer, maybe. But because I'm the only person in the

business running the business, I find sometimes I need somebody to talk through my ideas with. They're not making the decisions, but it's having somebody else to talk to. Actually going right back to when I shared the studio with my friend, because we were both at the same point in business, we bounced off each other and I've found I've always needed that. I'm a people person.

**B:** So the value of the support was as a conversation?

**K:** Yeah.

**B:** If there was one single thing that was a barrier to continuing to do what you want to do, would you know what that was?

**K:** I don't know.

**B:** I find it interesting that you're not thinking: "I could just do this, if..."

**K:** I am naturally a problem solver. I look for ways to get up, over, around the barrier. There's lots of things that make it difficult and don't make it straightforward but I don't see them as absolutely stopping me.

**B:** Have you borrowed money? Have you had other investments apart from HIE?

**K:** I've borrowed money. I borrowed money to take over the shop premises because I had to buy the girl out.

**B:** And were you able to do that privately?

**K:** Yes.

**B:** What do you mean by privately? Did you go to your local bank?

**K:** Yes. I had to draw up a business plan and go to the bank and speak to them.

**B:** You managed to get commercial lending?

**K:** Yes. I don't know if it was just the right time because it's very difficult now.



**B:** When was that?

**K:** 2009.

**B:** So quite possibly now you might not be able to borrow?

**K:** I think I would struggle, from what I've heard. I don't know. I try and steer clear of the banks unless I need them and they need me. Yeah, that's an area of business I still...

**B:** You are uneasy about?

**K:** I'm not a big fan of the banks or accountants, the number crunching people. They don't have hearts.

**B:** And that's a business problem?

**K:** Yes. I spoke about business mentoring there and I've come up against business mentors that weren't helpful, they were very negative. But that was fuel to the fire.

**B:** In what way? Because they probably were trying to be helpful, they weren't just coming in to slap you around.

**K:** That's what it felt like.

**B:** I think that's a not uncommon experience. I think often the people that are doing the slapping around, they have no idea that they are, and actually that goes to the heart of some of these questions I've been asking you. If we can find a way of talking about some of these other values, then people who are trying to assist business might be able to do it a bit better because they might be able to understand that there are other values that matter to you.

**K:** I know.

**B:** So you've had encounters where you say, I mean, it's quite strong language. I was joking, but you said it felt as if they had come to slap you around, as it were.

**K:** That was what was so good about Cultural Enterprise Office, Starter For 6.

I just felt at last somebody was speaking the same language as me. And that really helped. Not just on a business level but on a confidence level. You didn't feel like you were someone with a daft idea.

**B:** When you were made to feel like you were someone with a daft idea, where were these people coming from?

**K:** One was through Business Gateway or HIE, and that put me off speaking with them for quite a while. It must have been initially when I was thinking of the retail side of my business. I went to discuss what I had planned and it was just an instant negative reaction.

**B:** Across the board?

**K:** It was just with one business advisor at this time because I hadn't put this plan together.

**B:** I'm not trying to get you to criticise an individual, undoubtedly they will have thought they were giving you useful advice although it felt destructive to you?

**K:** Yes.

**B:** Can you try and be a bit more specific? Was there no connection between what you were saying and they were saying?

**K:** It was just a clash of characters.

**B:** So did they think it was a lifestyle choice, not a business?

**K:** No, I think they just thought it was not a good business decision.

**B:** To start a shop at all?

**K:** In that case, yes, and possibly he wanted more research or more background information. The other occasion it was with Prince's Trust and it was with an accountant and a bank manager, and they just made me feel stupid – which I don't think is mentoring. If you have an idea, obviously you think it's good, and you want encouragement. I can take criticism and I can take people

saying: "Go and look at this." But that's when I felt a barrier, probably.

**B:** I think one of the reasons I'm doing this bit of research, I have no qualifications and I'm not a consultant in the conventional sense, but I've been responsible for getting things made and I understand the idea. Well, the last thing I did was a big movie, it cost £14 million, and at some point that started with somebody just going: "this is my idea." And there was no market research: We did none. So that basic thing, I kind of understand. But I'm imagining if you're sitting there with the bank manager and accountant who don't know you, that they will struggle with the idea that your design instincts, or the fact that you need to take pleasure in the product, they might find that...

**K:** They don't see it as a skill. And that's what really infuriated me. But also, that's the kind of thing that burns you a bit from future presentations. I sometimes think that I've been drawn to talking about the numbers or the figures because that's the bit people want to hear.

**B:** It felt that way because they didn't put a value on what you thought was valuable?

**K:** Yeah. I came out feeling: "Well, they can't design a scarf, can they?"

**B:** I'm sure they can't.

**K:** I think I'm crossing over my experiences with those parts...

**B:** Yeah, everyone who works in this area crosses over those experiences. It shouldn't be me talking too much, but I'll just tell you this story. My father is a scientist. He's a very well respected rather grand scientist, retired now, but he's done lots of important work. His wife of many years died and late in life he took up with another woman who is an amateur painter, and she's made him go to art classes. The first art class he went to was a completely painful experience. I mean, viscerally painful. He was feeling, like you were saying, how these guys

made you feel.

**K:** Just completely out of your depth.

**B:** He told me this story and it was actually with Richard Demarco – not a conventional guy anyway – and he said he kept on asking him: “What should I do? I’ve got a blank sheet of paper.” And really, there’s nothing more scary in his life than that moment with a blank sheet of paper. And Richard Demarco would not tell him what to do. He wanted someone to say: “There’s a fire extinguisher there, try and draw that, make it look accurate.” You know, anything. He would have grabbed onto anything like that, but the fact that he was there... I think Demarco said to him: “Look, just make a mark, let’s see what happens.” And that, to him, was the freakiest possible...

**K:** I can imagine.

**B:** “You’re trying to make a fool of me.” You might as well have asked him to jump off a cliff.

**K:** Been happier doing that.

**B:** Yeah, he would have been happier. He could have calculated the odds and thought: “maybe I’ll make it.” So maybe that’s what was going on in that conversation. But that’s interesting, isn’t it? But quite damaging, in fact. You obviously came out of it a bit determined despite that.

**K:** Which is maybe not always a good thing. It’s maybe put me off a lot of things as well. I felt that I had nobody in my corner that spoke the same language whereas I had...

**B:** We’re sort of lining these guys up as a bunch of bad guys, and I’m very conscious that they thought they were helping. Do you think they had any idea of how little effective communication there was?

**K:** No. I don’t.

**B:** They didn’t understand how big a gap there was between what was driving you?

**K:** And it’s got to be different, that’s why they chose the professions that they were in.

**B:** Yeah. If they came here today, what would they think? Would you be sitting going: “told you so”?

**K:** No. I think they would think I was getting there, but I maybe haven’t done it in the easiest way or the best way.

**B:** Right.

**K:** Maybe that’s what I think.

**B:** Who knows, we don’t know what they’d think. The problem was there was no language you could use to communicate. I suspect that’s quite a common...

**K:** I would say so. I bet that’s stopped a lot of brilliant businesses even starting or getting past the first three years.

**B:** That’s quite a strong statement.

**K:** I would say that.

**B:** So what was it in you? You were just that bit more...

**K:** Dogged, just really dogged.

**B:** If I was trying to understand the heart of what makes all this work, and the heart of what you might do in the future, is there something I should have asked you about?

**K:** No, I think you need to come back and ask me if I’m successful this time next year. Or ask the same questions again and see...

**B:** And see if we get different answers. I might do that. You’ve talked about the way you pick up on ideas and you’re constantly looking for ideas; is the presence of other cultural activities, other creative businesses, is that an important thing? Or is that a problem being in Kirkwall? Or is there, in fact, an ecosystem that you feel you’re part of?

Or are you part of an international...

**K:** I think that was one of the other reasons I wanted to start my business in Orkney; I knew a lot of other creative businesses. I knew the businesses that were already here nurtured each other, well – not nurtured, but they were open, like Sheila (Fleet) or Martin. I would happily email them a question or give them a ring and ask for suggestions or ideas. It’s not closed-doors. I would say I strive to get further throughout Scotland by seeking out Starter for 6 or Fashion Foundry. I see this as my base, but I love travelling. I love getting out and meeting new people, those type of things. I’m not just inspired by Orkney or my location.

**B:** So your own cultural life is broader?

**K:** Yeah.

**B:** And is it an important part of your creativity?

**K:** Yes.

**B:** It is. So what’s your favourite movie?

**K:** My favourite movie?

**B:** Total trick question.

**K:** I don’t want to tell you; Muppet’s Christmas Carol.

**B:** Muppet’s Christmas Carol, okay, great.

**K:** That’s the first thing that came to my mind.

**B:** That’s the one quote, if all this gets written up, I’m going to ignore everything else, that’s going to be the thing.

**K:** I don’t know, I have a lot.

**B:** That was a totally unfair question.

**K:** That really was.

**B:** Okay, thank you.

# Interview 8

Martin Boyce

Conversation between Bob Last, and Martin Boyce, artist and Turner Prizewinner 2011, at his studio

08/05/2013

**B:** Can I ask you first of all, are you successful, for yourself?

**M:** If I took a step back, which on occasions you find yourself doing, and look not to what I have, but perhaps what I've achieved, or just the situation that I find myself in, then my twenty-five year old self would probably kind of keel over in great delight.

**B:** That's very interesting you put it that way. I understand it's an uncomfortable question, but in terms of trying to understand what drives people to achieve things you can't avoid the question. My next question was going to be that if you are in some way, successful, was there a point when where you're at now is something you could imagine?

**M:** I didn't know what it would look like. It didn't visually exist for me in Scotland. Either at school or art school, the ideal of the artist was still ultimately a very traditional one. The local artists that we had that had this degree of success or fame...

**B:** Reputational success?

**M:** Yes, the figurative painters of the eighties, you know, Steven Campbell and Adrian Wisniewski and so on. And people were beginning to make a TV programme about them and stuff like that. And they came from Glasgow or thereabouts, so those things mattered. My other reference points were somehow more accessible, through interest in music and design and so on, the record shop was your art gallery. These were the things I was tapping into much more, you know, Peter Saville sleeves and The Face magazine and all these kind of things, so you could begin to see, through things that were being visualised there, you could see people who somehow had achieved some degree of notoriety or success, through

doing things like playing music or going to clubs or playing records or dressing up. That whole thing really interested me. For me it was all one thing, whether it was art or music or design, it was about entering that world. It was, and still is, a strong music scene, so we would come through, as soon as we could get into clubs or bars, we would come through from Hamilton, just outside of Glasgow, and start to go and see bands and all that stuff.

**B:** So this was when in your timeline?

**M:** '84, '85. Then I started art school in '86.

**B:** That was when I was still in the music business. What you say immediately resonates because one of the things that I've been talking to people about is, it's a bit of a horrible term, is an ecosystem. I hate the term art for art's sake but for the moment if we can use that to distinguish it from the opposite commercial driver, then there is this environment, ecosystem that includes both. That was my experience when I started a little label. We were doing some things which were clearly not for commercial reasons, but they were R and D that also fed into the more commercial endeavours. What you suggest is that that the more commercial parts of the cultural endeavour were also absorbed as R and D for your art practice?

**M:** Yes.

**B:** So it's a two-way street.

**M:** Well I had friends who formed a band and there's a point where they say: "Right, we need a bass player, which one of you non-musical people is going to play? It's only got four strings, how hard can it be?" But weirdly, I didn't want to, I didn't have a great deal of interest in being in the band but equally I wanted to participate. I don't know if you know Matthew Riggs, the curator, who is now based in New York, but he was brought up from Manchester and wrote a fanzine about Joy Division and there's a famous picture of Joy Division, one of the early pictures of Joy Division, and he's aged thirteen sitting on the windowsill in the background.

**B:** I do know who he is because I was around at that time.

**M:** He talked about something that I related to very much, is that it sort of wasn't enough to be just in the crowd, to be a fan, but equally he didn't want to be the guy on stage, there was some in between ground that you felt there was a place for you. So I immediately thought: "Well, I'll be the guy that will do the sleeves." Of course, my friend's band never got to it. I think we did a flex-disc or something like that, never quite got that opportunity. But somehow that world...

**B:** ...you were engaged in it.

**M:** But I immediately felt that it was going to be through a visual language, that's where I would end up. Even when I started art school, I didn't know what happened at art school, I didn't know there were different departments you could go into. I didn't know what happened at all, all I knew was I wanted to go. So it was very much about people and the world you would enter, and it kind of still is. That's at the core of why you remain in it or why you continue to do it.

**B:** So when you left art college, were you, in any sense, directly deploying things you learned at art college? Or was it more about what you picked up by osmosis along the way?

**M:** Well, it was all one thing, and the teaching from the tutors and the conversations through your peer group were all one thing as well. The department that I went through, which was environmental art, really functioned like that. There was no real divide between the studio and the Vic Bar. The conversation just continued and so the social dimension and the teaching time or studio time was very fluid. It wasn't new, but it seemed to make sense, it seemed to encourage possibilities for us as a group.

**B:** That sounds like a reflection of the outside world that you were participating in as well, that sort of ecosystem within the college is reflecting that?

**M:** Yeah, but in terms of what was happening in art in Glasgow there wasn't a world for us to step into. There was no art being made that we could really see that related to us, to how we wanted to make art. I guess I'm starting to say "we" because it never felt like a lone and solo activity from my perspective. It was very much, again, a quite fluid but core group of people, essentially your friends. And for whatever reason you all stuck together. Within that group there was definitely some very strong willed, determined and very ambitious people, more so than me. I guess these things reveal themselves, but certainly there was drive to do things and to make things happen. And there was a sense of: "Well, what's the options? Do you move to London? Do you move to Paris? Do you move to New York? Or is there a possibility to make something happen here and let people come to the city?" And so that became, probably out of necessity, but that became the angle.

**B:** Can I go back to the slightly uncomfortable notion of success? Clearly there are external measures which would suggest that you're successful, so I can label you as successful without you having to do so yourself, but I'm still curious to try and understand what is the measure of success for you, not so much in terms of external critical validation? Is it an influence thing? I understand this is a really difficult area for anyone to articulate.

**M:** Of course, it's all relative. You don't see it when you're in it because there's always something else, you've always got things to do. I guess, partly, it (the measure of success) is the freedom to do what you want to do and work in the way you want to work. It's one thing that the art world, by and large in my experience, seems to afford. And, people are always shocked when I talk about this, I have almost never been asked by a curator or a gallerist: "Can you do it a bit more like that?" It doesn't happen when you're making exhibitions.

**B:** Why do people find that shocking?

**M:** Because the client relationship is so peculiar. It depends which aspect of the art world you're talking about, because you've got more and more (of the art world) engaged in the commercial art world. So, if it's a record or a piece of music you want an audience, but you need only one collector to buy your work. Of course, that's only one dimension of that world. You do want an audience and you do want a critical audience and conversation but in the economic sense, you only need one bum on the seat.

**B:** When you lay it out like that, it seems self-evident, but it's quite an interesting dynamic.

**M:** There are artists who are well collected and make a lot of money but have very little profile in terms of institutions, in terms of museums or in terms of public collections or visibility, so they don't have a critical presence. I guess that's one aspect of success, one way of viewing it is achieving a balance between functioning in the commercial gallery system which also, of course, feeds into the museums and so on, and being part of a critical conversation, so you have a presence in public institutions, so that the work as seen, people see it and can engage with it.

**B:** That makes sense, and certainly that's one very clear measure of success you've outlined, which is that it's having the freedom to pursue what interests you. Just to clarify when you refer to the commercial system, in this case this is not a commercial client relationship? This is a commercial system that actually gives you the maximum freedom to do what you want to do? Because it's hands-off, it's one bum on a seat...

**M:** How do you mean? The way you work with a gallery?

**B:** I'm asking from the point of view of some of the potential readers of this interview who will be slightly confused. They may have a map of art for art's sake but they will not be clear about in the way that imperative interacts with

the commercial world that is also a part of the art world. As I understand it, what you're saying is that when your reputation is such that there's interest in your work from that commercial art world, then that can actually generate more freedom for you to do what you want to do. It's not a matter of your being commissioned to do specific things that you have to comply with – it's hands-off.

**M:** Generally yes. You make the work and then it goes out to the world and then you have people that are in place to try and find the right people to buy it and the right institutions and so on. Of course, there are very good collectors who then make the collections public and there are also collectors who donate to public institutions, and then of course you have the museums themselves who have collections.

**B:** So in a way, although it's a market, it's also a form of patronage?

**M:** That's part of it. Certainly in the States that's a big part of it. But also now you have collectors who collect the work privately. But a lot of the collectors, particularly in the States, also have foundations or they have their own private museums or galleries that they exhibit the work. They also make the work they own accessible. So they follow your work and the collective body of work and then they can show it to the public or invited parties.

**B:** So the freedom to pursue what you're curious about is what you're talking about, or is it the freedom to...

**M:** That's ultimately the thing. But then, I always had that freedom in a way. It was never an overnight thing but economically when you can run the studio and have a business and support your family; when you get to the point that you can have the space you need, have the help that you need, buy the books that you need, can go and make the trips that you need to do research and pursue the things that interest you – that's a phenomenal kind of freedom that then goes into the work; it

all goes into the work.

**B:** I'm very interested in that idea, the freedom goes into the work. Because again, I'm asking a lot of these questions from a perspective of people who will be thinking economically. Clearly applying economic theory to art is not, in itself, a useful or helpful thing but in your construction, that freedom all goes into work; that freedom can be seen as a kind of capital that you have. So it's part of the capital you need for your practice, if you will, as much as physical resources.

**M:** Yeah. It's like buying time. When I left art school we had the Scottish Arts Council and you had a number of different levels of grants that you could apply for, small project grants that went between one and three thousand pounds. You had three levels, I think the biggest one was about eight, which meant you could live for two years, or live for a year, not have a kind of crappy weekend job, a job in a bar or something. And that kind of freedom was really important. I remember a friend saying he's buying a washing machine with some of the (grant) money, and there was this debate: "You can't do that, it's supposed to be for your art." He pointed out how much money a laundrette costs, a washing machine means I don't have to spend that money, there's a whole bunch of stuff that I don't have to do. And it's like, actually, this is really important for part of my life. And it kind of made sense. Little things like that funnily enough become very important. But certainly buying time is important. And again, in the period after I left art school, we got housing benefit during the summer, I could sign on (for unemployment benefits) during the summer. After art school most of us signed on and went on various training schemes, anything you could do to keep other time available. The thing was we used our time pretty well, most of us at some point were on the committee at Transmission gallery, so you had all these really smart ambitious people essentially running a public space for the city, unpaid. And it still continues today. All this time we had was spent either making art or thinking about art, talking about art or

going to see art or running a space and inviting people into the city.

**B:** What strikes me is that you are talking about a moment in time when your and others' ability to make powerful art was enabled by the state but accidentally so? The space you had was an accidental consequence of policy. And what that makes me think is, of course, that the benefits system has been really tightened up, even before the recession. Yet governments intuitively know that accidental subsidy was very healthy for the arts. The problem they have now is they're trying to do the same thing intentionally purpose and that's incredibly difficult.

**M:** Yeah, because they don't know what to do.

**B:** Because they don't know what to do? If they were to listen to you, you've given a very articulate argument for saying that what they need to do is give people the freedom to think.

**M:** Yeah, if you wanted to create the culture that emerged from Leeds or Manchester at a certain time, musically or in design or whatever, you couldn't go about doing that (intentionally). The idea of regenerating cities requires a kind of wild knowledge, an ecology that is organic and just sort of happens; very much to do with people.

**B:** Wild knowledge is an interesting term. Is that a term you've used before?

**M:** I don't even know if I interpret it correctly, but the artist Pierre Huyghe, French artist, talked about it, how artists think. It's not a lineage of thought or research that is put in place by the academy – it's not a canon. It's a "Look, that's amazing," and then it leads to something else and leads to something else; it's an accumulation of things that just fascinate you. And then somehow get filtered through you and come out. You are drawing on these things not through focused research but through distraction and accidental happenstance.

**B:** Can I ask you, thinking about the, we'll use this term ecosystem for now, although I think it's about to endlessly get overused, but for now we'll use it. You mentioned earlier that there was an ecosystem of people doing things, some of which might be seen as operating in more commercial markets, but clearly, in fact, people doing them brought a lot of other values and interests to them. You had said earlier that this was an important part of the environment, for you. So if we take a record, an indie record – because somebody may be selling those records and making a modest profit from it – do you distinguish that outcome from your own practice? Do you think that it has a distinctly different value, or is it the same – it has something to say?

**M:** As a culture, for me they're very much part of the same thing even though they all end up in different places. The thing is, of course, there is a point when as a young artist you're making art and it is only going into other artists' run spaces or disused spaces that you get a hold of. It's like putting on a gig – you're doing them for your friends or other interested people. But then as you become more successful, the places where the work ends up changes. Most of these places are, by and large, completely public, have a public accessibility to them. I guess also the status of them, of the work, the framework around it is elevated and with that comes an elevation of the work. Yeah, I don't know, maybe I'm now doing stadium tours.

**B:** (laughs) Maybe you are.

**M:** I never thought of it like that before, power chords and that.

**B:** Well, there's nothing like a good power chord at the right moment. Moving on, can I ask you a little bit about the organisation of your work? I'm assuming there's almost an industrial element to the construction of your work, specifically because of the physical nature of it and I have met your assistants here and so on. Are you organised as a little mini industry? Do you have a limited company?

**M:** There is. That's just purely because my accountant says it's time to do that.

**B:** But on a practical level "you" are more than you, aren't you?

**M:** Yeah, yeah. There's a number of different components. Again, it's very fluid but increasingly as it becomes more organised and there's more at stake then you do become more organised. So the way my day-to-day world goes is there's the studio here, and there's the Modern Institute gallery, so that's Toby Webster who I knew from college and he was an artist and again worked in design went through art school, became more interested in curating, pulling together other artists and then saw an opportunity, went to the Basel art fair which opened his eyes to what was happening everywhere else – certainly in Europe and the States, large galleries and small galleries. There was a world where you could put together an amazing group of artists and you could sell their work, put the work into good places, galleries, exhibitions, and be part of that conversation. So he set up the Modern Institute along with another couple of people who then left. It's gone from strength to strength and is now considered an important young gallery, well, not so young now. People look very closely at what he does and who he exhibits.

**B:** So he has influence?

**M:** He definitely has influence. But also cares deeply about the city and that's why he's still here. That's why I'm still here. That's why artists are still here, and that in itself is important. I remember having this conversation with Richard Wright, this was years ago, talking about, I think, Dundee Contemporary Arts which been attacked (in the press) by Duncan McMillan or one of the old school. We were furious about this because we recognised the DCA was such an important thing. We were saying that being here – continuing to be here – is actually really important. Sometimes you don't need to shout and say anything, but just being here and working, that in

itself is important because it allows the city to continue and grow. It allows that culture, that ecosystem, to develop. In terms of how the studio works, there's the Modern institute and there's the studio here where a lot of research and model-making and some of the smaller art making happens. And then I work very closely with a fabrication company in Maryhill and they're all former art school graduates. It's called Scott Associates and it was Andy Scott who was a sculptor, and a guy called Simon Hopkins, who started it – but Andy Scott opened his own studio to focus on his own sculpture work and the company name remains Scott Associates. They've been going a lot longer than I've been using them, but they were initially a steel fabrication company that would do fencing and gates for people, maybe some things for architects, or theatre sets, anything that was going. I think that what they always wanted to work in the creative industries but that wasn't always possible economically. There were a number of artists who began to be in a position to say: "I have these ideas but I don't have the space or I don't know how to go about it," and they would go to Scott Associates. And as the art scene in Glasgow has developed, they've developed. They do casting and they do woodwork. If they don't know how to do it, they'll find out, or find someone who can. So they'll become a production company who can be very closely involved with producing the bigger sculptural work for me, developing it. They are like an extension of the studio.

**B:** Did they make that little piece? (points to a piece of steel resting in a corner of Martin Boyce's studio)

**M:** It's laser cut, in fact, I think it's water jet cut. And they cast this table here. And then, of course, they work with other companies so not everything's done in their workshop. You farm it out; they don't have a water jet cutting machine, but they know a guy.

**B:** So is that piece always in a corner?

**M:** I only just brought it from the house.

It's a detail of a pattern. This is a W and a P which stands for Winter Palms which is this sort of fictional, permanently out-of-season holiday resort that I imagined. When I had it in the house, it was part of a bigger window grille structure that I made. And then this was left over and I thought it should go on a wall somewhere.

**B:** It was looking very interesting propped up and it kept catching my eye. So – there's a structure of businesses around what you do. I would like to pick up on something you mentioned incidentally – that there may be an idea but you may not know how to implement it, in which case you can go out and source the skill, the methodology. Across all of the people I've been talking to, whether they're in an art for art's sake world or in a commercial world, generally – if they're creative people – that's the approach they take. An idea emerges and they're always extremely confident that they can source the specific skillset or technology or tools. That's interesting because there's a lot of talk about training and so on and so forth, and actually what I'm hearing in my conversations is that what really counts is the creative thinking, and most of the people operating can put together the specific training tools or skills that are needed to implement an idea, that this is not a barrier. That would seem to be your experience?

**M:** Yes. Some people will have an idea and really enjoy the distance that a fabrication company gives them. I know some people that – only jokingly, but it's a boast – that they've never touched the sculpture. Or they'll order it in a different country and it gets delivered directly to the gallery. These things happen, they're just working methods. There's no right or wrong, and people have opinions about it as if it's a less or more creative way or working. Me personally, I like to be very involved. But thinking about how something's constructed is very much part of how I naturally think. I really enjoy the design process of how things are put together. And also visually, it's very important how things are put together, it's not accidental.



**B:** I understand that, it's engineered.

**M:** Yeah, sometimes. One thing that occurred to me is that as part of this ecosystem, okay there is a fabrication company in Maryhill but they're very small and it's ...

**B:** It's hand to mouth?

**M:** I think it is, none of them are able to spend anything, none of them are making a killing at it. But interestingly, there are other cities, Berlin, Zurich, where there are amazing foundries. And it is something that occurred to me, that there are these skills that were certainly very much part of Glasgow and part of the history that could be redirected. There'll be a lot of people out there that could go into it, just redirected into a different field and could attract work internationally. There's a foundry in St. Gallen, Switzerland where people from the States go to get stuff done, people from Germany, all over the place. There are possibilities for this ecology to grow.

**B:** I want to return to this notion of success – it's a very clumsy and uncomfortable term – is there a better way that you can think of to express the value of where you're at now?

**M:** Well, there's a number of things. There's where I am and what can happen in the future. There's my presence, along with any number of artists that make the city an attractive place for artists to come and work and study and also stay, which seems to be happening more and more. The feeling that you're not just feeding off the culture, that you're kind of producing the culture, that you're an integral part of it, that you can bump into someone in a club or in a bar that's a student and because you're three sheets to the wind you say: "Yeah, I'll come and talk to your class" or "Yeah, I'll go and do that." That's a great feeling and that's an aspect of my success, it's a kind of pleasure. As an example, there's a student studying in Dundee that I met at the Modern Institute Christmas party and she then came and did a work placement

in the studio and I said: "Between us let's hatch a plan." Because I have this honorary professorship at Dundee, I said: "Look, I was given this thing, I don't really know what I'm supposed to do with it but if you and your class want to get together, you've got an idea of what I could do, I can spend a day looking at something or looking at work or putting on an exhibition or something." And of course you can't really do that unless you feel that you're in a position to do that, otherwise people aren't interested. But when you've got something to offer, that's quite an amazing...

**B:** So that's about influence?

**M:** Not that you seek to influence people, but that your influence allows you to get into situations that you otherwise wouldn't.

**B:** If I think back, for example, to when I started an indie label, it was exactly what you say. It wasn't setting out to influence people in a linear way, but the biggest pleasure from it was when you realise that it was an influence, as it were. There's a real value to having an influence but that doesn't mean you're setting out to influence.

**M:** Yeah, because you just want things to be better. You want to do what you're doing naturally but then after the fact, you see it having an effect. I still find it uncomfortable to think, you know, someone will say: "That work in that building, I think they've been looking at your work." Oh, come on, there's a million things that it could have been. But it'd be very interesting to feel that the work goes out there and then becomes part of something else, it develops. Because that's how I work, it's how we all work. You see things you're influenced by.

**B:** It comes back to wild knowledge?

**M:** Yeah.

**B:** What should I have asked you that I haven't asked you?

**M:** I can't think of any question. It's difficult, the reality is creative things will happen. Well, I think creative things will happen anyway.

**B:** I have no doubt.

**M:** But I think that there are things happening in education that will limit the opportunities for certain people, certain groups of people. And I think one of the things in Britain – and I keep making parallels with the music industry – but certainly it was by and large working class folk who drove that scene. Most of the artists I know just come from very ordinary backgrounds and could go to art school and could continue to make art. The gallerists tend to be from a different kind of background. Collectors certainly are. Are we going to end up with this ecosystem, ecology, which becomes quite hot-housed in a different way? Is it going to be about this privileged world? It's kind of heading that way, the art world has become a playground for the rich. You go to Venice and everybody parks their big yachts. And the Frieze art fair is very much about celebrity and the parties, the art fairs everywhere are becoming like that. You talk to people who know the art world; only ten, fifteen, twenty years ago – it was quite a different place.

**B:** I think you make a very good point. One of the reasons I took up the challenge of this piece of work, having these conversations is because if you help policy makers understand how they could mess things up, it could be that less policy is better. I think there probably is an understanding of what you're talking about, those opportunities perhaps being more constrained for the less privileged, but the wrong policy to try and help those opportunities, as we've seen recently can just make things a whole lot worse. What is clear to me is that governments' understanding the dynamics of the ecosystem can't be a bad thing. It's by no means clear that there are policy opportunities. If I was to try and distil what you were advocating, that would be create that freedom to think as democratically as possible?



**M:** Yeah, you can have policies which are about: “We feel that certain groups aren’t being represented in galleries.” So you start to kind of dictate. You do it in different ways, where money can be accessed if you put on a show that’s about this, or for this audience, or this idea of who an audience is, or what people need to see. I think these are the dangerous approaches. It has to remain creative. The other way to look at it is not so much what the city should have, but start to imagine these things disappearing and think what the consequences are. In the ecology, the analogy is completely right, what happens is you kill it because there’s no outlet. So you take away Transmission gallery, and once they go, then why would young people stick around? Because they can’t do anything, they’re restricted, they will just go somewhere else. You run down Tramway or run down the CCA or make it difficult for a small fabrication company to exist. If that one place didn’t exist, then who would I be talking to?

**B:** In that sense, an ecosystem is an interesting analogy because ecosystems are very fragile. Even the most apparently robust ones, you make little changes and they can collapse.



# Interview 9

Sheila Fleet

Conversation between Bob Last and Sheila Fleet OBE, one of Scotland's leading designer-makers of gold, silver and platinum jewellery, at her studio in Orkney

11/06/2013

[www.sheilafleet.com/about-sheila-fleet](http://www.sheilafleet.com/about-sheila-fleet)

**B:** As you gave me a tour of your studio, you talked about the fact that you're operating on quite a big scale but you haven't lost touch with a very individual kind of process.

**S:** That's really key, I think, to the success.

**B:** But you also said that you were customer driven.

**S:** Customer driven, but design first – I design what I want, and I'm very lucky that for whatever reason, I've been able to create up to 200 collections – what I would call a good portfolio of collections that all sell well. One of the retailers I spoke to once said: "The trouble, Sheila, with you, unlike some companies, they only have maybe out of a selection of fifty things in their portfolio, only four or five are good, but yours all work, so how can I move on?" And I said: "You've just got to make my collections bigger and sell more of them!"

**B:** The starting point is you design what you want? When you were showing me round you talked about the soul of the pieces, and although it's a sort of manual production line...

**S:** It's not a production line. Once we've replicated the piece, one person gets that piece, they trim it, it gets enamelled in a separate room, and that's only two people that have ever put their hands on it – it comes back to the same person, it doesn't go from bench to bench at all. So whoever signs the box has worked on that and there's only two people ever work on the box, sometimes just one.

**B:** What is the soul of the piece? Although it's very much a hand-crafted process,

there's a degree of mass production, it's cast from a master and there's a consistency but somehow there's something else in there?

**S:** We're very lucky. For jewellery, you have the lost wax process which is a wonderful way of doing short runs of a design, short runs which can still be very flexible. Adding enamelling means I can put another bit of flexibility into that, I can enamel them in ten different colours. So it's giving variety. What I'm trying to do is use something, a process, to earn a living. I'm a trained artist designer, if you like, who felt that I could make a living at jewellery but I couldn't make a living at sculpture. When I left art college, I didn't have the qualifications to be a teacher, at least I didn't have the right A-levels, but I had an extremely good qualification in jewellery design and making. So I went into designing for industry. Along the way, what I decided to do was to nudge commercialism ever so slightly further up the scale, nearer A for art or D for design. So I want to nudge commercialism to be a better quality of design or art. If I've succeeded somebody will tell me, but the customers seem to like what I produce, so I work on that and develop that. Your company can only develop if you've got a customer for it. At the end of the day you can't run a business and you can't create a business without a customer, it's all about communication. And I think there's a huge gap at the moment. Every day I get people coming in saying: "I'm really pleased to find you, we just find it so difficult to find things that are made in Scotland." Orkney's quite good at it because in the past we had quite a good marketing scheme which a lot of people in Orkney took advantage of.

**B:** There clearly is a cluster (of activity) up here.

**S:** A few years ago, somebody, a very clever person in our council accessed, I think it was a lot of money – I don't know if it was a couple of million or what it was, but it was a lot of money to market Orkney. It was about the beginning of my business when this happened and I worked with

a guy, John Clark was his name, and I said to him at the time: "If only we could get all the craft businesses and create a craft trail a bit like the whisky trail." Well, that's what he did. With the money we produced a booklet on all the crafts. Now I'm wanting the same thing done digitally, but much bigger than Orkney – I want the whole of Scotland to have that advantage. Because at the moment you have governments who are saying: "We'd like to create jobs." Well, I've just taken on two more people recently, one in the stock room, one in the workshop. Now, if every small business could take on two people in a year in Scotland in the creative industries, what a wonderful way to earn a living!

**B:** I want to ask you about that wonderful way to earn a living. There is a conventional wisdom that you hear amongst economic policy makers that describes a lot of things as being lifestyle choices in a dismissive way, but when you talk about it being a wonderful way to earn a living, that to me ties back to your view there's a soul embodied in your products. Now, that's a very difficult thing to put in a spreadsheet.

**S:** It is, isn't it?

**B:** I want to push you on that, what is in there?

**S:** What I would say is that if you care about something it will come through in what you're doing. When I watched Nicola Sturgeon and Alex Salmond standing up together, before they were elected, I said: "There's a winning team." And I'm quite good at spotting that type of thing. You know, I could feel that they had much more than what you could write on a spreadsheet. Now – whether you call that passion, and I think they have passion that's shown through... of course, people can see whether you've got genuine passion. I think we've come through...

**B:** I'm really sorry to interrupt you, but can you see that passion in an object, though? Can your customers see that?

**S:** Do you know why they can? Because of the way it has been treated and finished and presented. I remember once I went into an exhibition – it was local crafts here – and there was this beautiful knitwear and there was a little bit of wool with this lovely handmade card on it, and it was so beautifully done that I was drawn to look at it. Now, anybody can tie a piece of wool on a label, but it was the way that it was done and it was the type of paper, the choice of every detail. William Morris said if something is designed well and made very well, it's got a much better chance of selling. When I design something, I try and design it well and also pay attention to every step of the way; I call it detailing. When you manufacture something, if you ignore any of the details you'll end up with not such a good job; it's like sanding down a table – if you miss some of the grades of sandpaper you'll end up with not such a good job. No matter what anybody imagines, if you don't think something, it won't happen, and when you think something, somehow it does go into that product and it will look better if you've thought more about it, or if you've treated it better.

**B:** It is a very tricky area.

**S:** It is a very tricky area for government to see. They would understand it if you said: "Things usually look like the thought you've given to it." Sometimes you have to go quickly and you might be right, but if you want something to be really thought out well, you best take a good time to look at it – it's the same with the design, presentation. What I always say is I probably put a lot into something, I work long hours, I work really hard but I enjoy every minute because it's passion, so it's not like work. Ideally people should find what they really like doing and it's not like work, then you put this passion in and you get it to work.

**B:** When I suggested your studio had a production line you explained very clearly that it's not a production line. But you do have a system that allows you...

**S:** To make money (laughs).

**B:** ...to operate on a certain scale and to make money. Would there be a point where if somebody said: "Okay, we have to automate more of this, you can do treble the work and make a load of money..."

**S:** ...I don't think anything matters as long as the product at the end of the day looks the way you want it to look. I'm not against any technologies or anything that helps me. You should always look at everything that's modern and embrace it and see how it can knit with traditional craft. For example, years ago you might have to pedal a motor, but we've got electricity so why not use a motor that's charged? So I'm okay about it as long as the craft itself (remains), for example, you've got tumbling machines – I wouldn't leave my jewellery with that finish because I don't think it has character. The hand polished paste, finish paste, has a character and a warmth about it. If you take a drawing and you photocopy it, it's not got the character of the original – that's what tumbling is to me as opposed to hand finishing. The hand finishing puts a warmth into the piece, a caring-ness about it, so I still hand polish everything. Everybody is quite unique in what they're doing in their business, one thing doesn't fit all and people (policy makers) should just look and see what somebody's doing and then ask them, "How can I help you?" And actually, rather than understanding what they do, you just have to decide whether what they're doing is something that you want to support. Is it worthwhile supporting? You ask them what they need to help grow because they know what they need. What we've gone through is a period where people have told us what we should need.

**B:** Who's told you what you should need?

**S:** We've gone through a period where people at design courses or Investors in People ...now, when that (Investors in People) came out, I'm not saying that's a totally bad thing, but at the end of the day, when you make the course more important than the end product, it held my place up. I wasn't allowed to access help from Highlands and Islands Enterprise

unless I did Investors in People. Now, how is that helping me? It's not – because my company didn't need it at that time. Now, about four years later when my son was older, you see, I said to them: "If I'm the designer and I take my eye off the ball to design the next two collections, are you going to underwrite the loss I might make if I do this project?" But I do need the building, we're bursting at the seams, there's people working in the old shed. "Nope, you can't get any help unless you do this." Several years later, my son goes along and says he'll do it, and that phase has passed – we don't have to do it any more. It's like: "Oh my God!" I suppose they have a framework they've got to work to, this is what I mean about how you have to fit the scheme they're giving you and it varies from county to county. I would say that most of the time I keep going for what I want because I know what I think will work best for the business. In time, I think they've realised what I'm saying is true. I have done it in a way where I can say: "This is what I've used your money for and it's been successful." I think the problem has been that people have to have a framework, if you don't fit in that framework... What I'd like people to have, maybe like yourself, who go around and say: "Let's look, is the business working?" Yes, it's working. "Could it expand?" Yes, it could expand. "This is the type of business we should help. What is it you're needing?" And we would tell you and then you would have to evaluate that. Every company's different.

**B:** They are and that's part of the challenge, and it's not unique to Scottish government, I think...

**S:** Basically most people want to do their best and governments want to do their best.

**B:** This idea that lifestyle might be a part of why your products work, do they need to understand that, to find the x-factor? Is it the same as the soul of the thing that you talk about?

**S:** Yes. Anybody who does anything well, they're either very gifted and it just falls

from them, which happens sometimes, or they've worked extremely hard to get there. There will be both.

**B:** My experience is people who are very gifted tend to work very hard too...

**S:** I think so because you get stuck in the pleasure of the outcome. And I think we should just be looking to find out how individuals can flower and blossom. Whether you run or you're musical or artistic, it should really be starting at schools, folk should be looking out for these things and really giving them all encouragement along the way.

**B:** Do you think that's happening more or less than it used to happen?

**S:** I think people do have opportunities now. I think we have gone through, before the recession, we've gone through a wonderful period of spend, spend, spend, and everybody had a fabulous opportunity to do whatever they liked almost. And that's why it's so difficult for the government if they don't have the money, how do they focus their money on things that they think are going to be successful? I think it will come down to competition. We have to realise that everybody in the right place can probably make a good contribution.

**B:** There's definitely a new understanding that these small businesses, that didn't get measured before, might actually have a lot going on. There was a little bit of a scandal last year because the computer games industry, which is quite flourishing in Scotland, came up with zero measurement in a statistical exercise because they're all small businesses, the size you're operating at would be big for a games company. We've talked about success. I've talked to people who are apparently purely commercially driven but making a creative product, and people who are working clearly in the art side of the spectrum. Where do you see what you're doing sitting, it's a craft business, is that a step between art and commerce or is it different altogether?

**S:** I see jewellery as design rather than art. But the public don't really know me at all as an artist. What I've been doing for the last twenty years is earning a living. But like I say, I've been trying to nudge commercialism into a better place. I don't see why we can't do really nice things in a commercial way – really good design in a commercial way. I'm not frightened to stay safe and produce what the customer wants me to produce. I produce what I want to produce and then I find customers who want it. And that's why it's successful because they're not quite knowing where I want to go next. I might go from pebbles to wild grasses to something else.

**B:** So in that sense you follow your instincts.

**S:** Yes, I follow my instincts.

**B:** You don't research and go "Oh, I think this is..."

**S:** I'm a great believer in watching politics, and I watch and listen to politics whenever I can because I think politics shapes the world we live in. And I liked the idea of people becoming a little bit more – in business and in government – a little bit more passionate about what they do, rather than just a job. The professional politician kind of worries me slightly. They maybe need to come and see what it's like to work in an industry even if they come like that programme where they had Undercover Boss. Maybe we could have some politicians coming in and working within a business for a week or two. If they had the time it would be interesting to see.

**B:** So although money is important...

**S:** ...you have to more than that. Integrity, it's the soul bit. Integrity would be the soul.

**B:** There's a point where you wouldn't go to because it would...

**S:** Absolutely, because I don't think you'd get the end product looking the way you

want it to. It's not just about money; if it was about money, I would probably know a lot of things like how much I've got. I leave that to my son now. As long as I'm okay. If I need something that will make my company better I will definitely have it. I like to look long term rather than short term. My pleasure is in seeing it work, and I felt rich the day I didn't have to count whether I had enough to pay all the bills and the shopping! I never want to go back to the day where I've got to count up to see if I can afford that or that. I've come the hard way; I left school at fifteen, worked, got into art college and thought: "What the heck do I do with my degree? I can't become a teacher." And it drove me into industry which was quite good. I had a great training down in the south of England and when I came back, I would just say I've earned my living by my craft and I've handled business from a designer's point of view.

**B:** Can you imagine a scenario where that would somehow be compromised? Can you imagine what that would look like from a business point of view? For example, an investor could look at your business and think: "We could really turn..."

**S:** I've been approached like that but I said no.

**B:** You said no?

**S:** Well, I can see that until I can train somebody to be me, you can't move on until somebody moves in behind you. And I felt that the craft, as I know it, takes a lot of time to train people. I've never had a salesman for that reason. The salesman could have definitely oversold the product beyond what I could produce. So what I've done is we've done our own sales, it's like turning on a tap, when we think we've got enough we don't work quite so hard in the trade direction. And if we haven't got enough then we have two or three tricks like, get out there and get a new collection out now. When the recession hit, we bought the metal. The other thing we did, I was sitting at my drawing board and I just looked over the design I was putting

out at the time (which) was quite chunky and heavy; I took one look at it and there was a design I'd done that was like twigs, morning dew, sprinkler enamel, clear enamel on it like dew on twigs, and it was all open work. I just leaned over and said: "We'll get this going now for Christmas." So we left that and we put that in. It meant that the price of the metal that had gone up, the perceived value of that piece, was the same price. The piece I was going to put out would have had to go to £200 – I couldn't possibly – my customers would have said: "Whoa." But nobody said to me: "That's lighter." I just had to make sure the design was right for the moment. It was Christmas and it was the idea of snow or frost on twigs. It just went down a storm. It's still one of my best selling products. That lay there for two years because I thought for me personally it was a bit light and open work and not my style of thing. But since then – you'll notice the one I'm wearing – there's open work where you don't pay for the holes. But you have to be very smart about not letting your customer down in design. It's strange to say, but I had to make designs lighter without them being horrible. You still have to make them fantastic. Of course, this one's a creel, it was a net, so it's got to be open, it wouldn't be solid. So I went much more into designs where I felt an economical amount of metal was a plus, not a minus. I suppose I've been in design so long I would say to designers if you've got a problem design your way out of it, but remember your customers, price points or whatever. People are much better off now and much better design trained, all the people that have gone to schools in the last thirty years have had much better schooling than I have in art and design, some of the kids now at school have got a fantastic sense of design. Well, they're not going to buy rubbish. They're going to buy good design. So the next generation coming up, the government needs to believe that design is money. Things well designed is money.

**B:** So what you're saying is design and arts education is also about educating the market as well as the practitioners.

**S:** Yeah.

**B:** Is it important that there are other creative businesses in Orkney? Other arts? There are galleries, are you part of something?

**S:** Not really. I suppose in a way, we've got it here, we live in the country, I've got rabbits and hares and oystercatchers on the lawn. But I do go to Edinburgh a lot and I do love to soak up the feeling of what's going on, you go to a few art galleries or whatever. If I've got time I go into Jenners, my concession there, and I watch the television, you watch the news, you watch the fashion programmes, so television is a great one for people who want to know what's going on, any good art programmes. But if I'm in London, I'll go and see anything that's on.

**B:** There's a German word called *zeitgeist*, which doesn't directly translate but it's a sort of word for that world. You say you go and check to get a feeling to what's going on.

**S:** I watch the news and everything, because I think everything affects everything. Certainly the recession is affecting the world, so you should immediately be aware of that. What you see and what you glean around you all the time (is important)... in Orkney we do glean it through the television or visits or whatever, and when you travel you're probably much more aware. I loved going to Edinburgh when everybody was making over their restaurants; do you remember when everybody's restaurant was being made over and it was wonderful? I remember I was walking along George Street and I walked through this shadow on the street and I thought: "Wow, I like that." I thought: "How can I use that for myself?" I want this, modelled it. So I came home and I bought this LCD projector and I projected the workshop on the wall of the gallery in Kirkwall. So it wasn't there, it didn't take up any space, but I loved the modern feel to it. So I think you have to be aware, it's other things you see... I go to Birmingham and we go out for a nice meal and I liked the way the

tablecloth has been laid across the table. I'm always looking for anything, wherever it might be, wherever. And architecture as well, which is wonderful.

**B:** Policy makers, or people who want to help or investors, they're always looking for a plan. When you get a fresh idea, if it's not because you've done a timeline and a spreadsheet and said: "Okay, on this week we're going to do a new idea." How does it work?

**S:** What happens is every year there's set things happen throughout the year, there's trade shows that I go to. So I know I'm going to go to a show in October, which is the Scottish Trade Show in Glasgow. And I know I'm going to go to another one in January and then I'm off the Birmingham in February. The first one I go to is in September, I go to that in London. So that's four trade shows anyway, and sometimes I go to Munich so it could be five. These are points that I work towards and I want to take out two to three collections a year. But I just work away. What happens is usually I've got something on the boil, so I'll be working towards promotions as well, so sometimes what I do after the trade shows, say, in January, February, this is the run now of spring thinking. Everything's new and fresh and we all feel better! So I try to do my creativity early on in the year and then I do a few promotions at some of my own shops and we try out some of the new things. So there is a kind of plan, but sometimes things just come along. I had a customer come to me the last trade show and he'd said to me years ago: "You see this little shell which you find on the beach around John O' Groats, can you make me something with a shell in it?" I said: "Uh, I'll see what I can do." So I took it away and two years later he said to me: "Sheila, have you done it?" And I went: "Ah, no." Then he told me this lovely story about how his son had asked his girlfriend to go down to the beach and find this lucky shell, it's an Arctic Cowrie, tiny little shell the size of your pinkie. And she found a shell and she gave it to him and he asked her to marry him. And I thought: "Oh, how nice. I must do this now." So as soon as he said it was a wedding, I thought of a

teardrop shape and this is where you're working with a customer who is really easy, so I really want you to do something for this shell. So before Christmas I had the design idea of this drop shape, and a little cage – not a creel but a cage – that I could set something into from the back, and it would be captured in this pendant shape. I made the bottom of the pendant dark like the deep blue sea, getting lighter towards the top, but for the wedding I did it totally in crystal with her little shell in. So she got the first one. Now, she's getting married the day after I pick up my OBE at Buckingham Palace on the 29th of June so I can't get to the wedding, but I'm so annoyed that I can't do both, because what a lovely story! We launched that before Christmas and the story, it came through a customer really pushing me. If it doesn't come, you can't do it, but pressure sometimes makes designers come up with things so there's nothing wrong with a little bit of pressure and everything. People behave differently, but I feel that I need a wee bit of pressure so I eventually did something but I did it the way I wanted.

**B:** It was an indirect inspiration?

**S:** That's the soul, you see, and I write a little story, I tell them how it came about...

**B:** So your customers know that, they know the story.

**S:** The customers know the whole story and they really, especially on the website, they love buying into that. If you have creative thoughts your customer would love to know a little bit about that creative thought. For any designer, I would say to them – for goodness sake, it doesn't cost you anything to give them a little bit of story as to how you've been inspired or whatever.

**B:** I'm going to push you to imagine again the investor that you'd say no to. If somebody came to you and said: "We can sell three times as many, take it all away from here, we'll pay you loads of money. Just come and lend your creative thoughts, you don't have to run a business

any more." Would you do that?

**S:** No.

**B:** I didn't think you would, but why wouldn't you do that?

**S:** I've got my son now. When he was fifteen or sixteen he left school and he helped me. I'm going to stay and help him.

**B:** I don't believe that's the whole of the answer though. If this hypothetical investor gave you a tonne of money you could help him with that instead.

**S:** That's true.

**B:** So it's something else.

**S:** It is a family thing. In a way it's a way of life. You can look round here and you can see the fun we have. The girls here had a fashion parade and they raised £6,000 for cancer. That was second hand clothes – they called it Good as New. We just let them do it. We let Louise create the labels and they got in the church and they ironed everything. The goodwill that you get if you've got happy staff is huge. But you still have to be a boss that says: "No, we just don't sit and laugh every day, we work." So we work hard and we play hard. Because I work, they work. I'm a designer who is happening to be running a business. But my son is probably more grown-up managing the business but he knows what I'm about, but he's never done a management course as such. But his wife's an accountant so that should help. But I couldn't have done it without Rick who did all the photography. Which is trying to let the customers see where the inspiration is coming from. And if I've done anything I've just done it my way. If it works, like I say, I'm probably unusual in that I'm a designer who knew she had to earn a living by what she did. So people don't really know what I could come up with if I was just an artist designer. I've earned my living by the craft I was taught. They're not taught like that in art colleges. In a funny sort of way I've taken on a mentorship with one of the girls that's left this year and what I'll try and tell her

is it's two things. Once you've trained at art college you don't have to become anything, you're doing that to earn your living but do it the best you can. Try and nudge the commercialism up to being a better quality of design or art. People think they know what I can do and design, but I've had some crazy big jewellery and way out things; I would have loved to have done sculpture, but I love art and design and I think good art and design is the food and drink of a nation.



# Interview 10

Sophie Kyle

Conversation between Bob Last and Sophie Kyle, Proprietor of The Skinny, at Bean Scene café, Haymarket, Edinburgh

03/05/2013

[www.theskinny.co.uk](http://www.theskinny.co.uk)

**B:** I've been asking people what does success look like, to you? Is The Skinny successful at this point?

**S:** Mm hmm. Yeah, The Skinny is successful at this point.

**B:** What does that mean, for you?

**S:** For me personally it means building a sustainable profitable business. However we also have other success measures, metrics within the business and I guess creatively, one of the ones that we've identified recently that we really love and where we feel The Skinny is being successful, is when we see a contributor who had not worked for a publication before – or had very little experience – come on board at The Skinny, cut their teeth, make content, get good at it, have their own opinions, be published on The Skinny, get a bit of a name for themselves, and leave and go on to other paid work in the industry. For us, that's a success. We've had journalists go on to all kinds of other publications, independent magazines, glossies, paid-for newspapers, all across the industry in all the different departments, writing, photography, illustration, the whole lot for print media. And then another success within The Skinny that we really love – and this is important because this is about the commercial side of The Skinny and how it champions the arts – is when bands or artists or somebody who has been at the very beginning of their career and we've covered them have, a few years later, gone to bigger full-time salary or a proper income from their work, and they kick it back to The Skinny in terms of advertising. So we've had that through a couple of bands who've been signed after a couple of years of The Skinny talking about them. And it just gives us pure joy

to see those full-page adverts coming in from labels or from arts organisations that are supporting these artists that we have been championing for years. So there's a kind of evolution of the industry side and providing a step up for people into the industry and then there's also this more commercial side of the arts that we're championing, because they don't have a platform anywhere else, and they're not being talked about in mainstream press, they're not being talked about in other publications – and when we do, we encourage that in the rest of the industry, that's when they start to make it and it's just brilliant that they remember The Skinny and kick it back.

**B:** You've talked about profit and sustainability and championing the arts and you've talked about other measures that you and others in The Skinny take a kind of pleasure from. I asked what does success mean, is it a basket of things?

**S:** Yeah. Well, it's different things for different people within the business.

**B:** And just to clarify, your role in the business is...

**S:** I'm publisher.

**B:** And you worked from the start?

**S:** I founded the magazine in 2005. The company that now runs it is called Radge Media, and that started in 2007. Because The Skinny was originally started up as a social enterprise and run by a group of volunteers, it ran into some pretty serious cash flow problems in 2007 and we brought in an investor who fished us out the deep water with the debts to HMRC and to the printers, and that's when we really began to commercialise the business. We started increasing the circulation, we started increasing the visibility of the brand and we started professionalising the journalistic side of it. But as in any media, there are different things that you have to attract to it in order to make it work. You have to attract the contributors, you have to attract the readers and you have to have enough of

a scale to attract the advertisers. That's why we have different measures of success in the business.

**B:** And those different measures, is there a tension between them?

**S:** Yeah, there is. I mean, there's always tension in an organisation but generally everybody understands that there are different measures of success in the organisation. Yeah, people need to perform to different targets.

**B:** And for you as publisher, if you had to jettison, if you had to fail some of those measures...

**S:** We have.

**B:** You have failed against some of those measures?

**S:** Yeah. We don't succeed at them all the time.

**B:** Is there one key single driver above all else?

**S:** The common goal is making The Skinny the UK's largest entertainment and listings magazine, and that's where we're going with it. This is a brand that will have a national relevance but a local trust. And because the magazine is made by people in your town – but it has the scope and the processes in place to attract international advertisers – it's got the scale and the processes in place to attract international big brands, national brands. That's where it's going.

**B:** So that measure is a fairly straightforward business measure of growth, can that be divorced from the other measures? Does it fight the other measures?

**S:** They contribute to it, I would say. They all contribute to it because it absolutely has to be a brand and a title that people trust because it's a media and people read it, they consume it. And unless it has that trust and that connection to the local environment it loses impact, it

loses engagement and ultimately that's what we sell to our advertisers. We sell our engagement with our readers to our advertisers. So all of the successes, the contributor successes, the editorial successes and the advertising successes, they're all linked to that bigger goal; becoming the UK's largest entertainment listings mag. 'Largest' sounds like just numbers but it needs to be present in people's minds as well, and the way to do that is to get a connection – otherwise it's just another free magazine that everybody doesn't read.

**B:** Commonly, government policy can only engage with business support and development around an idea of growth. You do have ambition for growth, but you just said 'largest' isn't just a numerical thing, so is there an emotional content in some way?

**S:** Yeah, definitely, it has to have that presence in people's minds, people's lives as well. Because The Skinny isn't just editorial, it's not just opinion, every month we're running 5,000 events listings. So it's a resource as well. And in that way it's a guide. The idea is that anybody can pick up the magazine and find something that they connect with in it because it covers all of the arts, it covers every single aspect of it – from going to the theatre, or going to the opera through to, arts and culture I should say, through to sexuality and how you interact with people and kind of common themes that are happening in the environs socially. So it's meant to be there as a reference and a place where somebody, anybody can find something that clicks with them.

**B:** Presumably your team can understand these different measures. It sounds to me that some of them are very difficult to formally measure, they sound like intuitive measures.

**S:** We do actually have a couple of lists of successes and you can count them. But predicting them is the intuition, the intuitive part. You can count the outcomes but predicting them is an intuitive thing. And that's the creative

part. It's about understanding people, it's about understanding their work on both sides, the work that they produce for The Skinny and the work that they produce themselves as artists, and it's about The Skinny's team being able to recognise the x-factor, but not The X Factor, because that show has changed that phrase forever.

**B:** It has. It's colonised that in a way you can no longer use the phrase. So predicting or planning of how you achieve against those other measures is very difficult?

**S:** It resides in the people, in their skills base, their education, their awareness levels, I would say although it's not really a very good business term.

**B:** That's why I'm pushing you a bit on this because that's exactly what I'm interested in. I had some assumptions going into this process from my own experiences but it's been quite interesting the extent to which across a number of very different business models, there's this element of intuition and how central that is, however people put it. I talked to Stephen Marshall who used to be at Dewar's, have you come across him?

**S:** No, I've not come across him.

**B:** Oh, many roads lead to Stephen, he was Global Marketing Manager at Dewar's. You'd be surprised how many things that The Skinny reports on will turn out that Stephen Marshall has an oar in, Found being one, for example. He acts as a patron – he's a very hands-off patron with Dewar's money. Dewar's is a big corporate company so I asked him how he explains himself, and he said that corporately, Dewar's could understand they were getting an emotional, intuitive "cool" value from these things and were content with that. Of course, for policy makers, that's totally scary.

**S:** It's not to us.

**B:** Why is it not scary?

**S:** Because that's what we trade in. That's connection, that's the way you get connection, when you arouse some kind of emotion in your market.

**B:** So at what point did what The Skinny is now, occur to you? Looking back, was it only last week or...?

**S:** It was the end of 2011, about November 2011.

**B:** And prior to that, what was going on prior to that?

**S:** Prior to that it was a really similar product but I didn't realise what it was doing. So the team were getting it right, business-wise and also in terms of the vision as well.

**B:** Okay, that's interesting. It had existed and you were all doing what you were doing and what? You got stuck because you weren't able to articulate it?

**S:** I realised it wasn't sustainable unless it was national. And that was to do with the way that the industry is set up in terms of advertising and print advertising.

**B:** And how did you come to realise that?

**S:** The numbers weren't adding up but the energy was really strong for it. So there was an incongruity between what we were making and what we needed and what we could get. So we needed to realise that it had to be national and that it could be national.

**B:** What year did you first start it?

**S:** The Skinny first started in October 2005.

**B:** So looking forward from 2005, is what The Skinny is, now recognisable?

**S:** Yeah.

**B:** If it's recognisable now from back in 2005, can you put your finger on what it was in 2005 that's still there now? What element of it is the recognisable bit?

**S:** The independent vibe. You're making me use all of these total squashy words. But yeah, the independence, and I'm also taking more of an editorial tack on this than I normally would. Maybe I'm making excuses, but the editorial is still very honest, it's still very open and in a way a bit kind of righteous as well. It's a collection of voices from Scotland that are touting their opinions that wouldn't get published elsewhere. And that is still the same editorial voice. I would say that the journalistic standards are higher than they were in 2005.

**B:** I wasn't meaning to suggest that it had somehow just kept on doing whatever it did, but it's interesting that when you talk about what you foresaw at the beginning and is still there, you end up talking about those more difficult bits to quantify. You talk about vibe, you talk about emotion and connection, which suggests that they're a very important core, if that's what survived from 2005 until now.

**S:** Yeah, it is.

**B:** So even though now you are, I guess, a bigger business and you have the prospects of becoming even bigger in business terms, that other side remains important.

**S:** It's core, yeah. And it's about that connection with the reader and the audience.

**B:** When you started it, what were you doing?

**S:** Me personally, I was a waitress.

**B:** Had you been at college?

**S:** Yeah, I went to Edinburgh Uni and I did English Lit. And then I went travelling for a year and came back and was waitressing.

**B:** At what point did the idea of starting...

**S:** ...there was another magazine running before The Skinny called Noise Magazine which was a free sheet. And the guy that started it sank fifty grand into it and didn't

get the advertising set up so it folded. But I worked on about six issues of that and there was a group of us who had worked on that publication and we just took the idea and started a new one.

**B:** So might you have decided to do something else? I ask this question because, for example, some of the people I've talked to working in what might loosely be called the creative industries, have been certain about what they wanted to do. For example, I was talking with a games company guy who said that when he was eight he was starting to program games and it never occurred to him that he would do anything else.

**S:** There were long periods when I've been doing The Skinny when I was thinking that I should be doing something else. While I feel very passionate about it, I will always work out what is best for The Skinny. I had quite a few years of thinking that I should be doing something else.

**B:** What would that have been?

**S:** I don't know what it would have been in terms of an income, because I kind of rely on serendipity and incidental meetings. Certainly a lot of the good people that have come into The Skinny have been chance meetings and serendipitous in their appearance. But I have a really strong interest in the environment, and bees.

**B:** Bees, specifically?

**S:** Yeah. So if I wasn't doing The Skinny now I'd be doing something with bees, but maybe two, three years ago, I don't know. I had no other ideas what to do.

**B:** I'm a bit dubious of the whole term networking that gets bandied about and everyone's supposed to be very organised about. Is that serendipity that you talk about actually a different word for networking?

**S:** It could be.

**B:** Do you think you make your

serendipity? I'm thinking of that saying 'people make their own luck'.

**S:** I don't really believe in luck any more. I think you can make your own serendipity, definitely. Like when The Skinny needed specific people, they have always appeared and it's only when you get to that point of knowing exactly who it is that you need, and you begin to visualise and picture them, that they begin to walk into your life.

**B:** So it may be serendipity but that has to be something about the environment in which The Skinny works, or the social context?

**S:** It could be, yeah. The messages that we send out and the communication that happens between us.

**B:** Are there other enterprises that you have more formal business connections with?

**S:** There are many, yeah, because of our advertising network. Everything on the income and advertising side is really process-based and very structured. And that's down, a lot, to my business partner Lara. She's put in all of these processes and that's really where the commercial drive has come from.

**B:** And would she give similar answers to you about these other measures?

**S:** She would, yes. Well... yes, she would. But she would also talk about money, hitting targets. But that's obvious, to me.

**B:** So if someone was trying to put a value on The Skinny...

**S:** Money value?

**B:** Well, let me ask, if they put a money value on The Skinny, which I guess would be turnover and profitability, does that fully reflect The Skinny?

**S:** No, it doesn't. It doesn't. There's a lot more in there. I think other businesses do it with goodwill, also The Skinny's

distribution network, because we have over 1,000 distribution points and 57,000 copies of the magazine going out every month across Scotland and the North West of England. There's a cost attached to that, obviously, but there's visibility in that as well. And then, yes, I would say there's more than goodwill that you can write on a balance sheet in the connection that we have with our audience.

**B:** And you earn a living out of it. How many people earn a living out of it?

**S:** Eighteen.

**B:** Eighteen, full time?

**S:** No, it's eighteen in total and five part-time.

**B:** If you could earn more by jettisoning all those other values, the vibe that you can't pin down, would you and your team do that?

**S:** There would be people in the current team that wouldn't do that. If there was a way to earn more money and jettison those values, would I do it?

**B:** Hypothetically, yeah.

**S:** There are about six men last night who tried to ask me that question and couldn't get the wording right.

**B:** Were they those equity investors?

**S:** Yeah. They just couldn't get the right words, so good question. I would, but not now. Probably in like two years.

**B:** You would?

**S:** Yeah.

**B:** Why?

**S:** You've got me on tape saying that now (laughs).

**B:** I know, yeah. It's going to press – "Interview with the Publisher of The Skinny, ready to drop values!"

**S:** I know assassins (laughs). Why in two years' time? Because The Skinny's changing at the moment and I think it will have changed a lot in two years' time and I will have changed a lot and will have progressed in my life in two years' time, and everybody in the team will know by then that that's the aim. Well, that could be an aim.

**B:** I know some of this seems quite personal, sorry for that, you can just tell me to shut up and not answer the question. But the reason it's interesting is because when you talk about these other emotional values, of course that has to be about personal motivation as well. So you are theoretically prepared to jettison those values for money...

**S:** In the future.

**B:** In the future. When I was talking to someone else about this, I started to understand the difference between what they're doing, and a more conventional businessperson. A big part of the difference was that they were putting a much broader swathe of their life into their business than in a conventional business, where you may put the part of you that earns a living and pays your mortgage in to your business, and the rest is outside. Is that a picture that makes sense to you? If you jettison these values we have been talking about, does that then mean that part of your life would be invested somewhere else?

**S:** Yeah, definitely. I would still need those values. I would have to get those values somewhere.

**B:** Okay, but it would be from outside the business?

**S:** It would have to be because I would assume that if I had jettisoned those values for money, then I wouldn't be operating The Skinny.

**B:** I'm sure if you were talking with equity investors it would all be about exit strategy; these guys always need to know about exit strategy. It's another

very interesting area because for the kind of people I've been talking to, the issue of exit strategy is always a problem because generally the value of the business in different ways has this intuitive element that you're talking about – which complicates exit strategies. The difficulty seems a common one.

**S:** Definitely. Peter Brown last night asked me the question: "Do you think The Skinny will be able to maintain its editorial values on an exit?" I just said: "I don't know." And ultimately that wouldn't be up to me. It wouldn't be my responsibility to ensure it any more. So what I do in my job is ensure that that connection is there and that value is there because that's the valuable part. And if I sell that then I've sold the value and it's up to the next person to make that value, and it's about people, ultimately. It's about motivating people and getting the right people in.

**B:** But it is commonly difficult for investors, if they were asking you this question it's because they understand that that may reduce their ability to get an exit?

**S:** No, there'll be an exit. There's an exit for The Skinny for sure. I don't think it's from within the UK though, I think it'll be from outside of the UK and I don't know how that will be structured. I don't know that much about how exits are structured. But these things are just theoretical until they come up in front of you. I think it is interesting but I get uncomfortable when people try and box it too much.

**B:** I understand it's hypothetical. It's interesting to me because of what it reflects back about what the drivers are for The Skinny and yourself. It's interesting that you're having to wrestle with that kind of question. Have you ever engaged with Scottish Enterprise?

**S:** Yeah. We're account managed by someone at Scottish Enterprise.

**B:** Are you in their minds a high-growth company?

**S:** Yeah.

**B:** Do you actually match their criterion, their published criterion – you've been growing a million a year?

**S:** Not yet. But we will in the next eighteen months. So maybe not a year but eighteen months, that's the target.

**B:** And how do you find that relationship?

**S:** It's really good, we have a great account manager. They're pretty hands-off, but we had an innovation day yesterday, business model innovation which sounds cliché and businessy, but it was really useful. *(interrupted by phone call)*

**B:** Okay, I won't take a lot more of your time.

**S:** It's okay, this interview has gone in a different direction to where I thought it may go.

**B:** Okay, where did you think it would go? Because that's interesting too.

**S:** I didn't really know, but I thought you were going to ask about our creative processes.

**B:** Tell me about your creative processes.

**S:** (laughs)

**B:** I mean, what I think I've been asking about is – where your creativity lies within the business, rather than what they are.

**S:** Totally, yes.

**B:** Because we're trying to get that map. But tell me about your creative processes then.

**S:** It's probably quite boring, but I was going to tell you about the collection of contributors that we have. And how they submit content.

**B:** Well it would be interesting to understand because presumably their creativity is what contributes to this brand value and vibe and engagement. So

yes, it would be interesting to understand how you as a business deliver that difficult to measure bit.

**S:** Yeah, the connections between all of the contributors are through the editorial team, and there's just a kind of triangle structure in editorial with editor at the top and deputy ed. who is assistant. Sub-editors, and then section editors who are all acutely clued up in their fields.

**B:** What's that mean?

**S:** They are experts in their field. So the film editor knows everything anybody could ever know about films. And the books editor is just so into books that you can barely get him to send an email. So these people are passionate about their scenes that they cover, and then they have connections to the writers and the freelancers. And there's around 150 of those in Scotland, there's about 70 of them in the North West at the moment. And it's about the commissioning process. We operate quite an open commissioning process where we don't dictate what we need. We don't change opinions in writing when content is submitted. And we just encourage the writers to come up with their own ideas.

**B:** Do you think your readers see a consistent vision across The Skinny or do you think they see it as a diverse thing where they've each got something that might interest them?

**S:** I think the main feedback that we get is that readers only stick to one section, the same as the section eds. So most of the feedback we get is that people who are interested in music just read the music section. People that are interested in art just read the art section. But The Skinny exists to hopefully cross-pollinate interests.

**B:** Because you'll sell more advertising if you cross-pollinate?

**S:** Yeah. The reason we cover so many cultural areas is because we need to open up the areas that we can sell to. So, everywhere – from theatres through

to music venues through to concert promoters through to alcohol brands, bars, restaurants, everybody. We can approach everybody in the entertainment industry.

**B:** A casual reading of The Skinny would suggest that there's an element of rebelliousness across the content?

**S:** Yeah, I think that's right.

**B:** Political with a small p.

**S:** Yeah.

**B:** So that's not an accident?

**S:** No.

**B:** That's part of your brand?

**S:** Definitely, yeah. That's actually in the brand's description; rebellious, rebellious.

**B:** When did your brand description emerge?

**S:** That emerged in 2010.

**B:** Okay, so that was a map of what you had been doing, in a way? That was the point you sat down and said: "What's this actually..."

**S:** Yeah, that was a solidification. And it was a three-day process with the whole team where we just asked loads of questions of each other and worked out the brand values and the brand tone and the brand idea at that time, although the idea's changed. The look has changed since then. We refresh it about every year. But the values, the tone is still relevant. They're still very relevant.

**B:** Okay. Is there anything else I should have asked you?

**S:** I don't know. What's the title of your report going to be?

**B:** I don't know! We were talking about

how your talent pool of writers emerged.

**S:** Yeah. Well one thing that I've noticed about the talent pool that we've had over the years and that we've got at the minute is a lot of the editorial side, they're from an art school background. And I think there's something in the way that they are taught or the way that they learn, their creative process in art school that really benefits the business, because I certainly didn't learn that way of operating with people when I did English Lit at Edinburgh Uni. It's a whole different way of operating and I've really noticed it because they've brought skills that I don't have in terms of communication.

**B:** So is that value that they bring from their art school background something that contributes to the engagement and the vibe as you put it, or is it about the business?

**S:** It is about how they operate within the company and producing work. The interactions they have between them are just really honed to produce good work and that applies across the board with writing, photography and then into the production system of The Skinny where full-time people operate. It's something I noticed really early on, like: "Oh, how did you learn how to communicate like that?" And then: "Oh, you communicate in the same way." We've had sculptors. We've had painters. Yeah, people who've done proper full-on art degrees.





# **Interview 11**

Stephen Marshall

**Conversation between Bob Last and Stephen Marshall, Global Marketing Manager for Dewar's in an Edinburgh club**

30/04/13

**S:** My central goal is recruitment to the brand, and this is not UK, this is a global thing. Some of the work we'll be doing will be in the UK and Scotland in particular because being important in the home of the brand, means you're important when people visit the home. We're the biggest selling spirit in Russia. But when Russians come here they can't see it.

**B:** Which confuses?

**S:** We're number one blended Scotch in America with Dewar's. Number one in Russia with William Lawson's. So the two biggest blends in the two biggest markets in the world and you won't see them here and nobody in this country knows them. They know Dewar's a little bit from history but people don't know it at all. So my main objective in corporate life is recruitment to the brand. So emotion, which is the emotions that people associate with the brand and the category, so Scotch whisky in total. So within the emotion you have advertising, really. And you have your intrinsic advertising, so for example, little documentaries you would put online about how we make our whisky. We would have inspiration, and we would have straightforward brand advertising. Inspiration would be if we do things with people that we feel live the brand, so maybe documentaries about people that live the brand. And then straightforward advertising is just straightforward advertising. So that's emotion, knowledge will sit here, and knowledge will come into new pieces of innovation. So a new brand, brand architecture. Brand architecture is a slightly different thing. Our brand architecture is...

**B:** We really needed a picture as well as sound here, didn't we? (Stephen has been arranging a structure diagram with empty glasses).

**S:** You've basically got five different types of brand architecture. Our one is big idea. So a big idea umbrella brand, Johnnie Walker, actually, are a better example than we are. 'Keep walking'. With us, it's about 'Live true.' And live true, not at the expense of others, but live true within doing what you believe in and doing things that you're passionate about, but that have some kind of grounding in reality. Like, there's a guy that I think is a good example, a guy called Joe, based in New York, a Brazilian guy who collects Brazilian records and does reissues and compilations but makes sure that he goes back to Brazil, finds little villages, finds the guys and pays these guys and says: "Look, I've set up a bank account for any funds that we make from this record to come back to you." And these guys have recorded forty years ago and don't expect, haven't expected anything from it, that kind of stuff. And then within this emotion thing is a lot of stuff around influence as well, trade. So the people who are connected directly with consumers.

**B:** Influence is interesting because I'm looking at how to translate when you talk to, say, the guys in Found and what they care about, and where the translation and common ground is with your goals. You're saying influence is one thing, because clearly they also want to be influential on some level and that seems to be an area of...

**S:** I'll give you a real example of something we're going to do for influences with Found. I'm in the process of setting up an exchange program with trade, so bartenders. I'm going to choose two bartenders from a bar in Spain, Madrid probably, two bartenders from a bar here and pair them up. Ask the bartenders from Spain and the bartenders from Scotland to go and work in the distillery for a day, create an idea for a bar together, and then run a bar for a couple of days in Edinburgh or Glasgow.

**B:** Just like a pop-up...

**S:** Yeah. Pop-up thing where they create new drinks and then they go over to Spain

and they work in a sherry bodega as well so they understand the production process and they understand the wood as well and they understand and care for wood. And then go and do the same thing, set up a pop-up bar in Madrid as well, and work together, and then create lasting relationships. And then have little powerhouses around Spain, Scotland and then do something in Moscow and USA and link people up around the world.

**B:** So you're seeding a kind of brand network?

**S:** Yes. And with that, Found will be involved in doing experimental gigs. So gigs along the same type of thing. So this bar in Edinburgh gets the benefit of having a gig played by an experimental band. So it won't just be Ziggy and Kev (of Found), but they'll have to form a band with other people as well. So the same, it'll be about the spirit of collaboration and the spirit of creativity and working together, doing things that you really enjoy and not just for a monetary, I mean, everybody gets paid but...

**B:** ...it's about some other value?

**S:** Yes, creating something. If we can eventually get sessions that we record, and create an album from that then that would be perfect for me.

**B:** Because what's interesting, if we take the Found example, from their point of view, their feeling is that this all feels very hands-off and empowering to them. It feels like you're giving them the space to do what they want to do. Which, of course, I don't mean this cynically, that's quite clever, that you've translated that.

**S:** Yeah, but that's a different thing because that's me as a fan.

**B:** But your fandom has a value to Dewar's, the brand, doesn't it?

**S:** Exactly.

**B:** How do Dewar's understand that? Unless it's an incredibly cool company

throughout, there has to be some level of structure there where they wouldn't get it?

**S:** There's a few different levels to this. There's one level is the level of trust that I personally have. But that's come out of me doing stuff for the last seven years and I actually don't do stuff on Dewar's the brand any more – I run the single malts. I'm doing bits and bobs in Dewar's just to pass time because I haven't got the single malts ready yet, but my work is on releasing five-year single malts. The stuff on Dewar's is about...

**B:** Well clearly it's a lot about trust, actually, in that case, of you.

**S:** Yeah, there's a lot of trust and a lot of relying on me. The example is I get approached to do loads of things, approached to do rugby and golf all the time. And it's come down to now saying: "What's right for the brand?" and "What's right for me?" and "What's right for the team that I work with?" So you look at the interests of the personalities that actually work with you, and you say: "We don't care, we don't give a fuck about doing rugby." We don't want to sponsor Edinburgh Rugby Club like Aberdeen Asset Management, that's just a corporate sponsorship and it's not like that anymore. You can't disengage yourself from the work that you do. If you work in whisky you work seventy hours a week, eighty hours a week. You're doing double the working week. So you have to care about it. If you're doing it, it has to be music or juggling...

**B:** So what is it that the powers that be, without positioning them as clichéd grey suits, as it were, but they're a business and that trust in you must have arisen because of something that you have delivered and do deliver to them in a way that they can understand if not measure. And what is that? What do you think they think? Okay, we trust this guy, because he's delivered what...

**S:** I know specific things from my point of view, but it's all personal stuff.

**B:** I'm pushing you on that.

**S:** We don't have KPIs, we don't have sales targets.

**B:** Okay, I'm very interested in that translation process because I'm reflecting back to people the idea that you can't measure the real value in what these kind of people are doing with normal tools.

**S:** Say if we were short-term result driven, then I would have case sales to meet and I would have KPIs of PR dollars to bring in, all that kind of stuff. So I don't have any of them; a brand – the view on brands – is long term development. Although I bring in PR dollars, like I did a bottling a couple of weeks ago that Richard Branson bought and he came along and had a party and was pictured drinking it and so it was in every piece of press. And I did that – me and Suzi did that together. I chose the whisky, I got an agency I work with to do a quick label bottle design, did some tweaks, fine, printed it up locally, did 200 labels, Suzi and I went up to the distillery and hand-filled the cask into the bottle and then waxed it, sealed it, packed it up and sent the 200 bottles over to Virgin. And it got millions of dollars of PR press and it cost us £1,000. Fucindo Bacardi who owns Bacardi sent us a note saying: "Love it" all that kind of stuff. Richard Branson sent us a note saying: "Great, thanks, love the whisky." So that type of stuff is so easy to do. But you do a bit like that every so often and it allows you a bit of freedom.

**B:** Okay, so there's a strategy there that gives you the space?

**S:** No, the strategy is – do good things and people pick up on it, eventually. It's taken me seven years of working at Dewar's to get the malts out. For seven years I've been working on that to get that out and I'm going to release it next year. But building that confidence, that trust, is by doing little, small things that work.

**B:** That work?

**S:** Yeah, I mean, it's taken a while for us to do this. The strategy has been, from my point of view, a big game of chess. But as a company, we have been relatively rudderless. The idea of the men in grey suits, it's not true, I've had five category directors since I've been there, so I've reported to five different bosses. Every single one of them's wanted different things. I've done my thing.

**B:** That suggests that you specifically are a clever strategist?

**S:** Well, I'm keeping myself in a job doing things that I like doing.

**B:** Yeah. If I talked to the guys in Found, that's also what they would say. And let's forget about the men in grey suits or the men in black or whatever...

**S:** We're not too bad. My boss just now is a guy called John Burke, who is the category director on whisky, he's a really nice guy. He goes on little silence retreats where he's not allowed to speak for two weeks. And I meet him once a month and he says: "What are you doing?" and I give him a list of things and he goes: "That's fine." I don't know if that's normal.

**B:** I don't know either.

**S:** Before this I worked for the Whisky Society based in Leith and I did their events, ran them for four years doing tastings and stuff. And it was a small company and it was taken over by Glenmorangie and turned into this hell hole, corporate hell hole. We're a far bigger company and the corporate structure gives me a lot more freedom. It's just different people.

**B:** Yeah, I mean, the reason I was pushing you is not because I'm trying to think: "Big bad corporate structure, how do you fob them off?" or anything. I think we all instinctively know what the value is and why we do these things but it's incredibly difficult to find the language that people who don't do it, can use.

**S:** I get the same thing in my company. John has said to me recently, I had my

review, and he said: “Instinctively you’re doing the right stuff. I don’t know how and I don’t always know what you’re doing but it’s fine.” And there is that element. I know that I’m very lucky. I’ll get found out at some point. It’ll all collapse.

**B:** Let’s call him the suit at the moment, it’s interesting that in that heart of a corporate organisation there’s someone prepared to make that decision that the way to get the best results is to give you the freedom to move.

**S:** Yeah, he’s an old trade union worker.

**B:** And what do you think, that makes it easier for him to decide to do that?

**S:** Yeah, shop floor, he worked his way up. Understands that you have production and you have division of labour and you have people who produce and you have people who can’t produce but will do the other bits that allow other people to use and that you are different types of people. That’s what I see in our business. We have this operations mentality. These people in operations will call me a dick because I want to do things... like I’m working on how we can put an MP3 player into a cork.

**B:** Okay, seems valid to me.

**S:** Yeah, like Ziggy’s recording an EP for it. It’s a great EP and I want to fit it into a cork and be able to present it so that people can listen to music while they’re... the operations people think this is pointless. It raises the cost of something. But I’m saying we’re raising the benefit to the consumer.” And there’s two different mentalities.

**B:** Now, when you say you’re raising the benefit to the consumer...

**S:** Yeah. You want better quality paper, you want a better experience when you’re drinking whisky...

**B:** Something extra.

**S:** It shouldn’t just be cheap shit.

**B:** Right, no. So in this case you’re giving them a richer, what? Richer emotional experience?

**S:** No, because sensory experience like nosing, scent, smell is the first thing you experience and it connects back to the limbic system so it’s the oldest part of the brain, memories are in there. But if you smell something and at the same time hear sounds, then the memory is stronger than just the smell. So from my point of view, it’s not just the fun of giving them some tunes, it’s the fact that if I’m giving them tunes and they’re drinking as well, they’ll remember the experience.

**B:** Powerful connection.

**S:** Yeah, it’s really powerful. Whether they fall in love with the whisky or not, they remember it. It’s that kind of “God is in the details” element to marketing that I really like. Little stories that people will be able to tell other people. I don’t give a fuck that we’ve won 500 medals. Nobody cares about that. But I care that Tommy Dewar had a pet monkey called Jackal in 1898 that he used to carry around with him, that’s the kind of story that people will remember. I like those types of little bits. And I think those are the bits that people... it’s a kind of social currency.

**B:** Okay. I’m going to ask you one last really unfair question then. Some people working in that kind of creative community listening to what you’re saying, they’ll be thinking: “Great, can you engage with us?” But they might also be thinking that you’re actually being incredibly sophisticated at selling them out.

**S:** Yeah, I know. I’ve thought about that before. One of the guys that just walked past, Neil, is long-listed in this Album of the Year Awards for Scottish album. I gave him £5,000 a few weeks ago because he was telling me he was skint and had no money to record his next album. And he said: “Well, what are you going to get for this?” And I said: “Absolutely nothing. The next time that you want to play a gig in Edinburgh, you don’t have the money

to put on the gig, you’ll come to me and say: ‘Do you mind if we put on a gig?’ We’ll put on a gig and we’ll help you put on the gig. And people who come will see the gig, enjoy it and remember they drank Dewar’s.” That’s not selling out as much as the Italian soundtracks, most of the Italian soundtracks from the fifties, sixties, the forty-fives I collect are milk adverts and cigarette adverts, it’s not selling out any worse than anything else. And it’s a personal relationship thing as well. I happen to work for a whisky company so I have access to a budget, but I’m friends with Ziggy and Neil and these people, and that’s why I do it. That’s why it’s different from record companies now. Like Kenny, King Creosote, recorded an album with Paul Savage a few months ago, recorded a complete album, went to Domino and said: “Here’s the complete album.” And they said: “Well, we want to change these tunes. You have to pay at your own expense and then we’ll release it.” Kenny’s going to do a little EP for me on the cork, I’ll pay for the recording of it, give him all the money for it, pay all the publishing costs, he’ll get all the fees for it and he gets credit for it. I ask no input on creativity, just the fact he makes something good.

# Interview 12

Stewart Henderson

Conversation between Bob Last and Stewart Henderson, Director of Chemikal Underground Records and Chair of Scottish Music Industry Association (SMIA)

30/07/2013

[www.chemikal.co.uk](http://www.chemikal.co.uk)

**B:** So I'm here with Stewart, second time around.

**S:** Indeed.

**B:** We'll explore some similar themes.

**S:** I hope you don't discover the lost recording and find out everything I've said this time is diametrically opposed!

**B:** What I didn't tell you is part of the research is – we do every interview twice.

**S:** Exactly, aye. Double tap people.

**B:** Just to test to destruction. I'm assuming that you're someone who has a cultural life?

**S:** Yeah.

**B:** I don't know, that sounds like a horribly bourgeois thing, but you go see things, you listen to things that matter to you.

**S:** Yeah, I do. I think you almost have to whisper this, or look over your shoulder when you say it; I think when you work within the culture in the arts, there's a process that takes place that can blunt your cultural appetite a bit if you're involved in it. But no, I am. I consider myself to be fairly culturally curious.

**B:** Curious. Interesting word. I understand what you're saying because since I started working in the movie business, I see less movies than I did beforehand. The other thing I notice is that once I found out how difficult it was to make a movie, I'm far less critical. It's like I see a movie and I go: "Well done, team. You've got it made."

**S:** Bravo. Yeah, absolutely. You're the one guy doing the standing ovation at the end and everybody else is like: "Jesus."

**B:** Culturally curious. So you're still culturally curious. How does that relate to your work or your business life? Is it something that's outside that? Is it something...

**S:** You can always sort of guard against lapsing into horrible interview clichés with these things, but it becomes a part of the day-to-day. There will be conversations that I would have naturally within the office, or some decisions we might be taking about who this band should try and tour with, or what opportunities we might be able to figure out for them, that – by their very nature – are culturally focused and all that, but you just don't think about it in those terms. Again, I've found myself, particularly in the last couple of years, through my work with the SAY Award (Scottish Album of the Year Award) and the SMIA and all that, I kind of find myself – and I use this term advisedly because I don't like it but I recognise it for what it is – I become more of a cultural networker than I ever was before. An aspect of running Chemikal Underground was that we, for a long, long time, ran Chemikal Underground almost in splendid isolation. We didn't do it collaboratively. It wasn't driven by any kind of arrogance or anything like that, it was nothing really like that, but Chemikal Underground was a standalone unique thing, and there wasn't an awful lot of collaboration that went on. Maybe it's part of me getting older, maybe it's part of the political cultural landscape, whatever, my involvement with the SMIA, but I've looked up a lot more over the last couple of years, and I've kind of spoken to a lot more different people. I deal more regularly with Creative Scotland – again, whether that's a product of the times that we're living in or not, I don't know.

**B:** So you've become a more proactive...

**S:** Yeah, I'm a more active constituent.

**B:** But when you first started out, was Chemikal Underground still something

that was culturally attuned, even if it was pop culture?

**S:** Yeah, I think it would have had to have been.

**B:** Why would it have to have been?

**S:** You take decisions, especially when you're younger... the decision that we came to, or that we arrived at, to create Chemikal Underground and to set off on this path of starting and establishing this record label, it wasn't born out of – I don't think so anyway – it wasn't born out of any kind of entrepreneurial vigour, it was a cultural vigour. Cultural curiosity, again, or a cultural recklessness which was just this kind of thing, it was culturally aware because our decision to start a record label was born out of respect and admiration for the labels that we had seen, that had gone before us, that we admired and was also equally and oppositely a distaste to the labels that we didn't like at all! It's like these things are born out of a cultural awareness, even if you don't think about it in those terms at the time; maybe you retrospectively fit these terms onto the decisions that you make. But no, we were passionate about music and we were committed to what we were doing, and we had faith in our taste from what we liked and what we didn't like. And as much as that's a cultural awareness, then I think that was how we set about setting up the label. Again, I think it's important to remember and recall – you'll be all too aware of yourself – establishing a record label in the mid-nineties in Glasgow, is nowhere near as common or garden as it would be if you do it now. It was an entirely different landscape. So we didn't go into it feeling that we would have the arms of our city around us to help us make it happen. You did it because you wanted to do it. You weren't expecting a large degree of third party help or anything like that.

**B:** That was a very interesting answer because you touched on, I think, four themes which have cropped up with remarkable consistency across all sorts of people. One was having confidence in

your own taste. Another was this notion of curiosity. I was talking to Martin Boyce – he talked about ‘wild knowledge’, which I thought was an interesting term.

**S:** Good way of putting it.

**B:** Same idea. Recklessness, which of course goes straight to the issue, of risk, which is really important. And also place. And all of these things have emerged in utterly different circumstances as things people talk about. But the reason I was asking you about this issue of cultural life, for want of a better term, and your answer kind of addresses it, it goes to the heart of this problematic idea that from a conventional economic perspective, the creative industries, as well as the arts, are seen as lifestyle choice. And it tends to be used dismissively. Whereas in fact, from what you’re saying, it clearly is a lifestyle choice in that it joins up your professional and personal interests, but that actually it may be that that lifestyle choice was the key thing that drove your business.

**S:** Absolutely. I thought about this since we spoke the first time and the idea of trying to find metrics that work or are, not reasonable, but...

**B:** Negotiable in some way.

**S:** Meaningful in some way for cultural stuff. It’s interesting because when you move away from the conventional economic measurements in terms of profit and loss and balance sheets and all that, you have to ask yourself: “Where does the value lie?” And again, I constantly keep checking myself in case you start to sound a bit overinflated, but I think what are we looking at in terms of value? Value to whom? Value to people with direct financial interests in what’s going on? Or value to the people that the particular enterprise interacts with on a daily basis, not always financially.

**B:** What sort of interaction do you have in mind?

**S:** Things like – does Chemikal Underground have a value to the city of Glasgow

beyond how much we’re able to generate in record sales or concert attendances? My argument, unsurprisingly, would be yeah, of course we do. “And how you go about quantifying that value and where you derive it from?” I would say. There’s a lot of things, as a pioneering spirit in cities like Glasgow, that have grown to become vibrant cosmopolitan cities. And you ask yourself the question: “Why has Glasgow become a vibrant cosmopolitan city?” And it’s like well, it’s got that – not overnight, but through a long protracted process of people who lay down markers and set precedents and offer aspirational case studies – if you want to use that horrible term – to other people who say: “You know what? I can do this because they’ve done it as well!” For me, whether it was as a young adult teenager, looking to bands like Teenage Fanclub who emerged from Bellshill just one stop round the line from me, and thinking: “Flipping heck, I can see them on the television!” That had a massive value to me. You can extrapolate that out to say if that in some way, however subconsciously, empowered me and my friends to feel that perhaps setting up a record label maybe wasn’t such an outlandish idea after all, then if we hadn’t felt like that, then Chemikal Underground might never have started. And if Chemikal Underground might never have started, I know we’re falling into Capra-esque territory here, but I think it’s like if Chemikal Underground hadn’t started, then think of the bands and the artists... not who would never have got anywhere, I’m not saying that... but you have all of these things.

**B:** I understand what you’re saying, that you’re not laying claim to these things that wouldn’t exist without specifically what you were doing. But what I understand you to be suggesting, is they might not have existed; what you’re doing is also part of this fairly vibrant world, and out on their own, none of these things might exist. And again, that’s actually another thing that’s come up in a lot of these conversations in terms of people talking about a scene, and that sense of a scene, or being a scene-maker. There are some really good German words you can’t

translate direct, but zeitgeist is a really useful kind of term. So you are embedded in that, but you are also a part of its driver.

**S:** Yeah, absolutely – it’s the landscape that we operate within, it’s the environment. That’s as relevant to the economy as anything else, if the economy is driven as much by confidence. That’s the other thing that I find extraordinary, this idea of: “How do you value culture?” as if it’s somehow empirically impossible to do it! Well, that’s bollocks because the best and greatest economists in the world talk about economics in terms of confidence and ephemeral, intangible things which drive the economy. That’s a contradiction straight away.

**B:** There’s a very interesting Dutch guy who’s writing for The Guardian about the anthropology of bankers. I came across him since I started doing this work and he’s having similar conversations to the ones I’m having, but with bankers and traders. Of course, theoretically they’re at the real sharp end of something that’s just about numbers. But actually it’s entirely intangible factors. It’s only in the middle it seems it’s about numbers. Because for them, it’s all about, as you say, confidence, or making decisions about confidence and so on. It does seem to come back to that. I’ve been using the term “collective capital” in that it seems something like Chemikal is clearly generating something that people put a value on, beyond the monetary value they are prepared to hand over to you. But is there a connection? There are values that you may have and your team may have, and then we’re also talking about the value of the work you do. Are those two connected?

**S:** I’d like to think it comes down to this idea of – are our decisions as a record label driven by financial imperatives, or creative or cultural ones? Broadly similar, but slightly different way of looking at it. Is the value of the label in financial terms different from the value that we have as an organisation? Well, I would hope so, because we’re not worth an awful lot financially. So I’d like to think that we’re

greater than the sum of our financial parts. There's a way of looking at this from a commercial, financial economic point of view – Chemikal Underground's best, most successful, affluent times are behind it. Or, certainly at this point in time they seem to be behind us, because the salad days of Mogwai and Arab Strap, Delgados... looking back on it retrospectively, seemed to coincide with what I would consider to be the last buoyant spell of music retail in terms of how it's tied in with physical formats. So there was more money to be made back in the turn of the nineties to the 2000s, so that relatively speaking, we did okay. So from that point of view, our ability to generate turnover and sell records is lower than it was back then. However, in the ten years between 2003 and 2013, what had Chemikal Underground done other than sell fewer records? We've continued to build a reputation. Not based on how many records we've sold, but on whether it's credible, critical acclaim or whatever. But we have continued to add and contribute to whatever cultural inertia we have as a label.

**B:** Momentum or inertia?

**S:** I don't know, maybe I should have studied harder at school, maybe I'm using them interchangeably when I shouldn't.

**B:** Momentum, I think.

**S:** Although we're maybe selling fewer records now, you could argue that Chemikal Underground is a stronger label now than we were ten years ago because we have this ten years' worth of releases that have gone on. So you build up momentum.

**B:** I think that would be quite a common perception, that it's a stronger voiced label than it ever has been.

**S:** I suppose it's that way in a sense, that people in the main, will actually defer to their elders or at least afford them some respect that they might not have when they were younger.

**B:** So what you're saying is a couple of things there. It seems like your, or the team's, values are related to the value of Chemikal Underground because actually, the public reflection of Chemikal Underground is that, if anything, it's even more important, or certainly as important as it ever has been. Whilst, in fact, your straightforward business measure doesn't grow in some linear fashion.

**S:** No, but I think it's perhaps inevitable that we will trade more on the reputation we have now, than we would have done ten years ago.

**B:** I just want to come back to this point about being still there, and trading on that reputation. If I understand what you're saying, you've had ups and downs rather than some straightforward growth, but the economic point is that you are still here, still here to do what, though? You're still here to maybe make some money in the future or still here to have that voice that we talked about?

**S:** Well they're never mutually exclusive. The finding of that voice or using our voice...

**B:** Brand, voice.

**S:** ...is never separate from our ability to make money. We must never allow ourselves, as a record label, to become apologists for the idea that we want to make money and be successful. Success would allow us to continue to sustain ourselves and do what we do. I wouldn't want or ever advocate that we radically change tack of what we do, in order to become successful. Wherever we end up getting to, I'd like to end up getting there with some sort of uniformity of vision.

**B:** So although it's a complex relationship from what you're saying, the financial driver is supporting and sustaining your ability to exercise these interesting judgements – or these judgements that other people clearly reflect back.

**S:** Absolutely. It's why I still place a value on record labels, why I still think record

labels are important. I know people might contend that they're not. I think the voice that a record label can give – it's better. The Scottish music scene is better for having Chemikal Underground's voice as part of it than it would be if we weren't here. And I think that, to me, is because when you have any kind of record label that has an individual approach to how they do things – maybe individual is the wrong word, but certainly has their way of going about things – then people look towards the label. There's a curiosity, again, from the public's point of view in terms of what we do next, what we're going to give our seal of approval to.

**B:** That's a kind of power then.

**S:** It is, of course it is. And I think that's one of the things that we would trade upon, and one of the things that I would argue that we've absolutely, unequivocally earned, is our right to be able to say we've never insisted you like everything that we do – but this is what we do, and this is how we go about it.

**B:** Just to be clear, what you're talking about there is the choices you make. It's not how you're going to restructure your business or whatever, you're talking about the choices you make – about songs, artists, cultural.

**S:** Yeah.

**B:** I'm a bit surprised, it seems the term "pop culture", I only realised the other day, it's sort of completely disappeared from public debate. And it seems to me quite a useful term. Clearly if your cultural existence and your upbringing was going to the opera, then by comparison, you are operating within popular culture even though some of it is quite niche. But what you're talking about is the decisions you make, the judgments you make. Are they a reflection of your values? Are they a reflection of personality? Of your history? Do you know what they are?

**S:** Certainly in terms of Chemikal Underground, they are a reflection of our personality, or the personalities within



the label. It's not to say that the stance we choose to take is better or worse than, say, another record label that would decide to release different bands. But it's like we've never really chosen to work bands based on a commercial imperative, if you like. We haven't signed bands with a view to us thinking that they're absolutely definitely going to sell X amount of records and stuff. If you take that commercial imperative out the equation and don't ever confuse this with a lack of ambition, I think this is what some people within other industries don't get.

**B:** I think that comes back to lifestyle choice, a term that carries with it this baggage that it's not...

**S:** We don't see it as being unambitious. We, from the outset, have chosen to take a very individual view of what we want to release.

**B:** I think arguably that's extremely ambitious. To want to affect people, which would seem to be what you're saying.

**S:** I also think as the industry fragments, or as retail and stuff becomes difficult, then in many respects it touches on the niche thing that you'd mentioned earlier. In many respects the worst thing you could possibly do is panic and try and reach more people and sell more records that way by diluting what you did in the first place. Sometimes the best thing to do is just to remain as true as you can to what you set out to do, and just keep going the way that you're going, and you continue to retain the loyalty of the people that have followed you up until now. And again, there's lots of ways that people, maybe from the outside looking in, could maybe construe that as being: "Where's your plans for growth?"

**B:** You've touched on growth and sustainability and we'll touch on that again in a minute, but you've very clearly said there are two drivers and their relationship seems quite complex, the economic and, for want of a better term, this cultural one. Where does the pleasure

come from? When I talked to Jamie Byng, he was very interesting on that. He said when he gets a book list right – I mean, obviously they're quite financially successful – but when he gets a book list right for his years, he says it makes him feel like a DJ in a room when you hit three records in a row and it just clicks in the room. And that's what it feels like. It's clear from the way he spoke about that there's a kind of visceral pleasure, even from a book list. And I thought that was an interesting way, for those of us who have been in that kind of room, to articulate it. There must be a pleasure, I mean, there's a reason why you do it.

**S:** Yeah.

**B:** You may have forgotten it, but believe you me, somewhere there's a reason why you do it.

**S:** Somewhere. I'll reacquaint myself with it at some point down the line, I'm sure! It's not a million miles away from Jamie in the sense that there's lots of things that I get vicarious satisfaction from. You know, there's the selfless and the selfish element of it. The selfish element of having other people think that what I thought was good is really good, and I suppose that idea of people thinking: "Those guys have got great taste." But there's also the more selfless aspect of it of being able, in some way, to contribute to helping a band who I believe are great to get on and realise, without being too Oprah Winfrey about this, to realise their dream of being able to go into a studio and make an album. It's the one thing I remember from the Delgados, and in a strange way there's really very little that I miss about being in the band and all that, but the one thing that I do miss – which wasn't a thing that I thought I would have missed at the time – is the camaraderie in the studio, the science project mentality of creating this album.

**B:** Because commonly that's the bit everyone thinks is driving them nuts, when they went back.

**S:** ...hated it. I mean, the thought of going

into the studio was like: "Jesus wept!" whereas now it's absolutely not the touring and the gigging, and drinking and travelling the world and all that. I could see that far enough. But that process of sitting down with my friends and putting your heads together and coming up with stuff. So from a label point of view, there's a real satisfaction that I find from almost being like a patron of these bands to try and create circumstances, and with some very limited resources to try and help them do that and experience that. And I think the pleasure that I get from having an album get great reviews, or for the band to go out on tour and to go and see them at gigs. It's still the gigs that I go to, and the bands are great and the crowds are really into it and they just sound amazing, that's terrific. That's the thing.

**B:** Yeah, the one bit I miss about the music business now I'm in the film business, is that moment of when I had a band and I was at the side of the stage and they were getting ready to go on and there was a big crowd. That's actually the thing that I miss. There's a quite visceral connection with your audience, which in the film business you don't get. Anyway, that's an aside. It strikes me as quite odd actually, if I was asking you: "Do you want to grow your business?" i.e. make a lot of money. It wouldn't occur to anyone that perhaps you should be self-effacing about that and describe it as selfish. Whereas there's something quite upside down about the fact that when you talk about cultural value and being a part of the zeitgeist or the collective capital, as I put it, you feel necessary to point out that that's possibly selfish. Is that perhaps a slightly odd inversion of how things are?

**S:** Yeah, probably. Without doubt I'm as full of contradictions as the next person.

**B:** I didn't mean... it's not just you. In terms of the general debate, that's an odd thing, isn't it?

**S:** Yeah, I don't know. I sometimes use these words like selfish and selfless maybe far too carelessly.

**B:** Stand up and be counted for arrogance.

**S:** The other thing, as well – I hate conforming to this horrible stereotype, which I recognise. I don't consider myself to be part of it but I understand, because the people think that Scottish people in particular have this horrible allergy to success, or that we hate to big ourselves up, or that I always have to scuff my feet and talk into my chest if I've done anything good. I find, and it's happened over time, that the longer Chemikal Underground goes on for, the more proud I become of what we're doing. Not what we've done but what we're doing. I don't consider that to be selfish or self-obsessed in any way. I think that's perfectly justified pride in what we've managed to achieve with the label.

**B:** Again, I was talking to a guy called David Thomson who has got what he calls his digital toy company called Ludometrics here in Glasgow. And he was talking about selfish creativity. And it relates, I think, to some of this. Because I was asking him about if he ever did any market research and he said: "Of course I don't do market research because people are just going to tell me that they want something they already know. My job, and the point of what I do, is to think up the things that they don't know." And his point was that, in a sense, that selfishness about what he did was crucial to any commercial potential apart from anything else. It comes back to the thing you started talking very early about – having some confidence in taste or confidence in decisions. I suppose that doesn't have to have an arrogant construction because it can just be a desire to share your choices with people. I mean, you're not ramming it down anyone's throat.

**S:** Yeah. It's funny, if we want to stray into a degree of arrogance, in a perfect world, I would like to think of Chemikal Underground in some way as being one of a whole host of others, but one of the definers, if you like, of Glasgow as a city. The Chemikal Underground, over time, has maybe managed to work its way in some way or other into the cultural DNA

of this city. When the book is written about Glasgow, there will be a word, we'll be in the index somewhere. But that, for me, as older – and even though the retail side of things is becoming more challenging – it hasn't occurred to me in the slightest to say: "Okay, it was good but it's time to wind it up." I don't see it that way. For me, one of the big things we've got next year is this thing we've got through the Commonwealth Games, and it's a point to what we're talking about. It's not an advert for what we're doing, but Chemikal Underground has been out in Bridgeton for nearly seventeen years and in my view, all of the developments that have happened in Glasgow, all of the cultural and cosmopolitan artistic steps forward, leaps forward that Glasgow has taken as a city have been great; the Garden Festival and the City of Culture and all these things, they would as well never have happened if you were in the East End of Glasgow. The East End of Glasgow is a desert culturally. All of the old venues, whether it's the Dennistoun Palais or any of these places, they're all long gone. For me, it's like when the Commonwealth Games were coming and we were thinking about whether we should put something forward as a project, it wrote itself. The idea of – we're in the East End, we need to take it upon ourselves to try and deliver and curate a kind of music and cultural programme – that, yeah, okay it's internationally facing and all that stuff, but it's absolutely selfishly focused on the East End and we need to try and come up with a way to weave some programme into that part of the city. We came up with this idea of calling it the East End Social and it'd be this thing that anything could be part of it, whether it's the Calton Lunch Club or something – they can be part of it, and the idea of a whole load of things; putting string quartets into old folks homes, whatever, it could be all manner of things. And for me, in terms of Chemikal Underground, I'm not saying that that is absolutely the new model for Chemikal Underground that we will stop selling records and concentrate on delivering events or community initiatives or anything like that, but it's an iteration of the label. It strikes me as

being perfectly, fundamentally natural to what we're doing. We can still bring the sensibilities that we would have as a record label and apply it in the same kind of way that I hope the record label has lacked condescension or pretention in the way that we've gone about our business over the last seventeen – or however many – years; that we can take those same qualities and bring it to trying to put things on in the East End. Whether that's for young people or old people, whether that's bringing Thom Yorke to the East End or whether it's bringing The Proclaimers – it doesn't matter. There is absolutely no way on Earth we would have got the vote of confidence to deliver a project of that nature if we'd applied for it after three or four years into the label. But the fact that we've got it now, it's serendipitous in terms of the time; the Games landing in the East End right now at this point in time – you couldn't have written it. You couldn't have made it up. But it's an opportunity for us to sit and not completely change who we are, but to ask ourselves questions of how we might want to recalibrate what we do.

**B:** Iteration is a very useful term in this context, isn't it? Because it suggests continuity but reinvention at the same time, which I think is perhaps integral to the business model.

**S:** I was just going to say that, and it's not just for music – for a whole manner of people it's natural, it happens naturally. You're almost unconsciously or sub-consciously or whatever, constantly having to react and tweak and alter how you go about doing business. And that's been imposed upon us as a record label clearly over the last ten years because of the way the technology's changed. People have to change their business models from time to time, but I think with a lot of arts, culture, music organisations, that's a constant process, a dissatisfaction with just staying the same all the time. You were talking about, what was it – Martin Boyce referred to?

**B:** Wild knowledge.

**S:** Wild knowledge, yeah, it's like it's wild knowledge, but it's a restless knowledge or curiosity – that idea of, you're constantly looking around.

**B:** Which is interesting that that's central to what you do, because from a conventional point of view of business planning and sitting down and making a five-year plan or a ten-year plan or a set of projections, it's quite difficult to know where on that spreadsheet you can put "restless" "curious" or "dissatisfied" isn't it?

**S:** Well, that's the thing. It's like if we were to go to, for example, our bank; it happens to be the Royal Bank of Scotland, ironically enough.

**B:** There are other banks available.

**S:** Of course there are. It's like if we had gone to the bank and said: "We release records, we're a record label. We want to deliver this big community project for the East End and we need some money to do it." It'd be like: "Sorry, I don't understand. Why? What? I thought you released records?" In the same way that I mentioned earlier, it seems like a perfectly natural thing for us to do and an area for us to... I don't even see it as diversifying, to be honest, that's the thing. I don't really see it that way.

**B:** That's why I like the term iteration in this context. Because that seems a very good fit, as I understand it, to what you're saying. Just to talk about that project for a minute, which obviously looks quite large in your thinking at the moment – you said it was also international facing. Is it possible for a sense of place and locality to be very, very important, as it would appear to be to your value system we've talked about. How does that work internationally? Does it work internationally? What's the relation? I'm partly thinking of that question because one of the people I met with in this was Hilary Grant who is just starting out in Kirkwall, making beautiful knitwear but isn't making a living, but she's selling to the equivalent to Harvey Nichols in Tokyo.

It's rooted in traditional knitwear. It is a remarkable model where someone who wasn't yet able to pay herself was selling to Harvey Nicks in Tokyo! I couldn't think of a more extreme connection between something that is rooted in place and an international presence.

**S:** Right from the beginning with Chemikal Underground, we were careful to make the distinction that when we set up the label and we were a Glasgow based record label, that we weren't setting it up as a Glasgow record label to be parochial or to be some sort of 'fuck the man' or anti-London or anything like that. The phrase that we used even back in '95 or '96, was that we are an international record label that just happens to be based in Glasgow. That remains the case. The way that there's a mutually supportive arrangement in place between Chemikal Underground and Glasgow the city, is that Glasgow has got such a great reputation. Certainly certain areas, internationally, they're associated with music, almost synonymous in some cases with music.

**B:** Most people think the Fire Engines are a Glasgow band (they are from Edinburgh). It has that overwhelming power.

**S:** Well, yeah, it is a bit of a black hole, it does suck everything in around it. It would be crazy for us not to acknowledge that, but in terms of how much place has for us in terms of relevance, in terms of international and stuff – I think it's one of the things that we wouldn't want to strip away from who we are because it's one of our characteristics, if you like. I don't see this in some sort of horrible Tartan Army sort of way, in strangely indefinable ways. I've always thought of Chemikal Underground as being almost like the archetypal Glasgow record label. This mix, balance, between reluctant articulacy and self-effacing, you know, there's a kind of dark self-effacing humour to a lot of the stuff that we do. I suppose it's always trying to avoid being seen as pretentious and all that kind of stuff. What's happened over time is we have our voice and, over time, I think we've become really quite

proud of the fact that we are based in Glasgow, that we're a Scottish record label, that we release largely Scottish artists. That plays for us in certain territories. The people who like the kind of music we release are well aware of the fact that Chemikal Underground is based in Glasgow, is a Scottish label. Again, I would never overplay it, but it touches on the things we spoke about the last time – there is a degree of cultural tourism that goes on. That is part of how we've gone about things anyway, even if there's a handful of people that come over to Glasgow because they want to see the Great Eastern, or they want to see where Mogwai recorded this or that or the next thing – I'm maybe getting off topic! I think it's important because where we're from has characterised the way that we've gone about doing things, almost from the beginning, without trying to batter people round the head with it. It's been an intrinsic part of what we do.

**B:** In fact, Chemikal Underground does have significant international reach, if you want. That voice.

**S:** Yeah, obviously it's been subject to the contraction of the industry as anyone else, but yeah. Whether it's America, Japan, certain Europe, Germany and things like that, we have an international reputation.

**B:** The reason I ask that question is because – also being quite dim-witted thinking about this in the past – but a company in some other industry altogether at your level of turnover would be extremely unlikely to have global influence. And it becomes clear that actually among all these micro-businesses in the creative industries, they have a disproportionately big global voice, which is perhaps part of that collective capital that they're delivering. That's what I'm finding myself thinking.

**S:** I think I would be wary in terms of what our international or global influence would be necessarily but one of the things, and I'm sure it's not unique to music...

**B:** I'm not blaming you for Afghanistan or Iraq, that's not where we're going.

**S:** Exactly. I think what we have, and what music in particular is good for is that it has an extraordinary reach beyond the purchase of specific units, way beyond that. It's the drop the pebble in the water kind of thing. You can reach every nook and cranny through the most unlikely of chain reactions, if you like. I think what we have, if it's not global influence, which I don't think it is, but I think what we do have is familiarity, brand awareness within very focused, localised demographics of people. But we have a wide reach in that respect. And that has a view as well, and it's an asset for us to have that because these things can come in handy when you least expect it.

**B:** When we last talked, I think I started out by asking if you were successful, which was a kind of uncomfortable question. And in a lot of ways today we've also talked about that, you've talked about a lot of things that matter to you, which suggest that on some level you are successful. But I remember that, unprompted, you said: "We are successful but not if you look in conventional terms of growth." Which was a slightly surprising unprompted response. Here's the first thing; in terms of growth or business perspective, when did we talk, it was six months ago, two months ago?

**S:** Yeah, a couple of months ago.

**B:** Does the business of Chemikal Underground look the same now as it did two months ago?

**S:** Yeah. But then we've got this big East End Social investment coming.

**B:** The genesis of that...

**S:** That was in the works but we hadn't heard that we'd been approved for the application. So in that respect, actually, you could say this, I don't know, I should have studied harder at university, is either an extraordinary or exceptional item.

**B:** Did you finish university?

**S:** I did, I got out as quickly as I could.

**B:** I dropped out, so you're ahead of me.

**S:** I did it under duress, it was horrible, left after three years.

**B:** But to take the term iteration, in fact, in the intervening time, a completely new iteration of what Chemikal Underground is, has arisen.

**S:** Yeah. I think it's another example, that way sometimes you find that fate or luck or whatever always seems to come along at certain times. This is another example like that. It's almost like that way of: "God, what would we have done if this thing hadn't arrived?" You don't even want to think about that. But it's come along at a key time, an important time for us. Certainly in terms of when we spoke the last time and I had volunteered this idea of Chemikal not being successful in conventional terms. I made that statement being aware of why we were sitting chatting, I know there was talk of how do we value cultural businesses and it was maybe in some respects almost like a cack-handed link to what we were there to talk about, but I believe it's absolutely the case. To look at the numbers of Chemikal Underground from its inception to where we're at just now, like most other businesses, I'm sure, small businesses, micro-businesses – there are big peaks and troughs. The last five or ten years has shown a fairly steady tailing off, but we've certainly plateaued at a level that is certainly way below when we were operating at our peak. Just to reiterate what I said before, I don't know if I said it as clearly as this the last time, but do I consider myself or the label to be a success? Well, yes, I do. There's no doubt about that. I think that we are a successful label and I define that success as much by our endurance and survival as I do through our profitability or whatever.

**B:** It's difficult for me talking to you because in the intervening time since we last spoke, I've had a lot of these

conversations specifically around these issues and it's difficult for me not to bring some of that to it.

**S:** It's interesting for me as well.

**B:** But in the words of the Elton John song, you're still standing.

**S:** Yeah, yeah.

**B:** And the question then is: "So what? What's the point of still standing?" And I wonder if it comes down to some of these things you talked about earlier, about exploring curiosity or being reckless. So you're still standing so you can be curious and reckless again?

**S:** Yeah, there's a tenacity involved, obviously.

**B:** It is fascinating because there's always words which tend to conflict because curiosity and recklessness and tenacity, I can see very clearly how the two are linked but on the face of it...

**S:** Yeah. Being candid I think there are two sides to this. And I think I might have touched on it when we met the first time. And this is maybe where the tenacity on the one hand, and the curiosity and the recklessness come on the other. We're still standing, why? So what? We're still standing for two reasons. One, because there's a sense of we have to keep going because there are practical terrifying consequences to confront if we're not. Whether that's overdrafts to pay off or wages that people are being paid. And for me, it's just the horrific prospect of failure, being honest. That has driven, sustained me for long periods of time much more than my cultural curiosity, I'll be honest with you. There are times where, from a tenacious point of view, I've thought: "There is no fucking way I'm wrapping this up because I owe people this and I owe people that and I couldn't sleep at night if I can't." So there's a very pragmatic fear of the consequences of failure that drive me, on the one hand. And then on the other, and it's an important part as well, there's still that appetite and

hunger and desire to continue to work alongside and with people that excite me and that I find interesting. As much as I may feel a little deflated or get a stitch from time to time, I still love music and I still love working with people that I consider to be really creative and inspiring people, and it's a great job. It's a great job that we're in just generally. And I recognise and realise how fortunate I am that I have the options and the flexibility available to me with the job that I've got. I think you can balance that financial pragmatism with a real cultural enthusiasm.

**B:** What was the last bit of music that you listened to?

**S:** This is just terrible because I'm sitting racking my brains thinking: "Oh God, what was it?" I'm just trying to remember exactly what it was. I listen to Chemikal stuff all the time – that almost doesn't really count. I'm trying to figure out. You know what? I was up the other day and I had got an old Kinks album. Yeah, it was in the car.

**B:** So what should I have asked you? What question have I not asked you that I should have asked you?

**S:** Jeez, absolutely no idea.

**B:** To understand Chemikal.

**S:** I don't know what question you should have asked but I know this, that I see, and have aspirations for Chemikal Underground. I see Chemikal Underground as being an important cultural contributor to Glasgow and Scotland and further afield way beyond the simple mechanics of releasing records and selling them. I don't know if I'm going through some sort of mid-life crisis, if this is the equivalent of a Harley-Davidson or whatever, but I do have aspirations for the label that go beyond what I had set out for the label even five years ago.

**B:** That was going to be my very last question. When did you start the label?

**S:** '95 was the first single.

**B:** This was when the band was...

**S:** Yeah, Delgados was the first single, yeah.

**B:** This was as your own label.

**S:** It's a common question, but Chemikal Underground wasn't set up as a vehicle...

**B:** My question is about where you're at now – if you put yourself back at that moment, is it familiar, do you think?

**S:** It's becoming less familiar. And I don't know, sometimes it's just accidental when you look back at these things. I don't know whether there's a ten-year cycle going on. Started in '95, Delgados split 2005, we're approaching our 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary, obviously. And I can see the label moving into this other area, certainly one that I'm interested in, in terms of trying to work in much broader terms in terms of culturally, musically, what we're doing and what our place is in the world and in Glasgow. So I don't know whether we maybe look back and say when we celebrate our 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary that Chemikal Underground will hopefully be positioning itself as some cultural organisation, some sort of record label 2 or 3.0, in terms of where we're moving forward. I remain confident for what we can do and how we can find our voice to have it continue to be relevant to people moving forward. It's interesting because even if you'd asked me this five years ago, where do you see Chemikal Underground going? I'm sure I would have answered in the sense of: "Well, just to continue to put out good records. Maybe have a successful album and keep going." Whereas now it's more about trying to position ourselves, yes, to have this core business of working with bands and releasing albums and stuff, but to position Chemikal Underground in a way that maybe makes it more relevant to a wider range of people.

**B:** Okay, thank you. On that note, thanks.



# Interview 13

Ziggy Campbell

Conversation between Bob Last and Ziggy Campbell from the Found Collective, in Edinburgh.

03/04/2013

*Found are an experimental pop band and arts collective from Edinburgh, Scotland. Ziggy Campbell is one of the founder members.*

**B:** I'm talking to Ziggy from Found Collective. The Found Collective or Found Collective?

**Z:** Usually just Found.

**B:** Branding, very important. The first thing that I really wanted to ask you is what defines success? Found work at a whole range of things, I would say, successfully. For you, in terms of your drivers or your own measure, are you successful?

**Z:** I suppose we are. I wouldn't say it in a "chest-out" way.

**B:** I understand.

**Z:** I think we are. We make a living out of it. It's not the most important thing, but I think we are. We always work on a project basis, so it depends how well that particular project's going whether I would say we're being successful or not. But we always seem to achieve what we said we were going to achieve when we write a brief.

**B:** And when you do that, what do you say you're going to achieve to yourselves? And then a separate question is, what do you say to third parties?

**Z:** We have always worked to brief, which is quite an unusual way of doing it, whether we set ourselves the brief or whether we try and fulfil somebody else's. For example, if there's a funding opportunity, often you have to meet a certain criteria and we see that not as a limitation but as a way to shape your idea, knock it into shape a little bit. So we

always work to some kind of brief. When we've finished a project we will decide whether it's been successful or not. I think so far all of them have, certainly a lot of the projects have reached a big audience.

**B:** So an audience, for you, is part of the measure?

**Z:** I think it makes it more worthwhile and it leads to more work so you can keep the longevity going. We did a project called Cybraphon a few years ago which is probably our most successful project as far as people seeing it, not just seeing the physical thing, but the whole online presence that it had. Off the back of that we got quite a lot of opportunities, like got to go and give talks and we were in a little book about that kind of work. Then somebody'll read that book and get in touch with us and you'll get another opportunity out of it. That, for us, is good. We want people coming to us rather than having to chase it all the time which is what we had to do in the beginning.

**B:** So now, reputationally, you've got an asset?

**Z:** Yeah. You start to build up a portfolio, then it's easier. The funny thing is now, in the past year, we've found ourselves doing a couple of client-based things which we've never done before and there's a lot of money in that, or there can be. This is the kind of arty stuff, rather than the music stuff, the straight music stuff. Although we have done some client-based music work. The more you do that, the more you build on your portfolio and you can then use that, point people at your website and your various projects and documentation. So you keep the whole thing going.

**B:** So when it's client-based, as you put it, that's when somebody's approached you. Who might be your clients now?

**Z:** We had too much work on, so we sort of half-declined, but there was a Red Stripe web viral advertising thing. They'd turned a shop in Hackney into a musical instrument, you walked in and

picked up a can from the fridge and the whole shop came alive. They asked us to do that originally, but we were just so busy that we didn't think we could do it very well and we were suggesting other people. That's the kind of stuff. The stuff we're working on just now is for a whisky company, Dewar's. They've kept us in quite a lot of work for the past year or two.

**B:** And how does that work relate to the self-initiated? Was it the self-initiated stuff that got you your reputation?

**Z:** Yeah, I think Cybraphon was the one that got us more reputation.

**B:** It was the key thing?

**Z:** For us, yeah.

**B:** It was your hit?

**Z:** It was the hit, yeah. But that was just like there was a funding opportunity, it wasn't much, it was like five grand or something. We saw it and we were like: "We could do a project that could fulfil that criteria." And then went away and thought about it and came back with the idea. It wasn't like we had the idea in the first instance and then tried to get it funded.

**B:** It was arts funding?

**Z:** Yes, it was New Media Scotland.

**B:** Do you think there is a consistency of vision or idea across everything you do?

**Z:** I think there is, regardless of the fact that we change to suit things.

**B:** From the outside, that's my impression. One of the things that's unusual about the model of your whole organisation is that although you're starting to do client work, it still seems you're bringing some consistent viewpoint to it.

**Z:** I think so. I think it's always important that we get the music shoe-horned in there as well to some degree. It's probably



no admission to say that we don't sell many records. I don't think that many people do any more.

**B:** I gather not.

**Z:** It's not a huge part of our income and I think if we did sell a lot of records, I don't know if we would do the other stuff. I don't know if we'd be as driven to try and get the music out in other ways.

**B:** In terms of really what drives you and your colleagues, did it start off with that conventional romantic thing of being a band? But then you had all these other ideas and skills?

**Z:** We started Found, I think, around about 2005, when I moved to Edinburgh. The first thing we did was put on a multimedia exhibition because we weren't long out of art school and we got to put it on in the RSA (Royal Scottish Academy) which is quite good. And we played at the opening.

**B:** You're all from art school?

**Z:** We all went to art school, yeah. Well, there's a professor that works with us as well, who I met later, he's a cultural evolution professor, linguistics and stuff like that.

**B:** So where is he?

**Z:** He's up at the University of Edinburgh.

**B:** Okay, in the Informatics bit?

**Z:** It's PPLS which is Psychology, Philosophy and Language Science. But yeah, it's all swimming in that same soup. When we first started, we put that exhibition on and played at the opening, quite liked just playing live music, got booked to play a couple of shows. But something quite interesting happened because I think we did one or two more experimental sound-based projects and then we got a name for doing the weirder stuff. And there was always more: "We'll give you five hundred quid if you'll put on this bonkers performance sound-art-y kind of thing," rather than: "There's fifty quid to pay a gig in London". Or something

like that.

**B:** So suddenly there was more value around these other activities?

**Z:** Yes. So it was like all right, we can maybe make the pair of them work together. You do one thing and somebody finds out about it and you get asked to do the next thing.

**B:** You were saying you turned down a Red Stripe...

**Z:** The Red Stripe commission, yeah.

**B:** That's a strong business position to be in, to be busy enough that you can rationally say no to that kind of opportunity. Yet everything you talk about, about the genesis of your reputation, is difficult for somebody who's not in your milieu to pin down and understand. I'm interested in this professor, he, she?

**Z:** He.

**B:** Not strictly part of the collective but...

**Z:** He's very much part of the collective. He's not in the band.

**B:** He's not in the band, okay.

**Z:** He's never going to get in the band.

**B:** He's never going to be in the band.

**Z:** It just happened by accident because I also work up at the Uni as a sound technician in that department and I started telling him about these projects we were doing, and he saw how it could be done better through his knowledge of computer science and programming. So he came on board for a lot of the projects, and he's still very much part of it all.

**B:** One of the things that we suspect, (and I have to be careful not to put words in peoples' mouths) is that in order for any kind of government or NGOs or even arts organisation to interact with people such as yourselves, they have to be able to unpick or measure the value in what

you do. It's not something that can go away. One of the things we often think is missed in their attempts to do that, is to pin down the reason why someone or some self-organised group such as Found, is doing what they do? It seems that you sit across a number of motivations. If you took away having a band, does the whole thing unravel?

**Z:** I think it might because that's the bit I really enjoy. As I said earlier, I don't think we're a massively successful band, we're just not. But we've kind of found ourselves in this little corner than not many other people are in so we can make it all work quite nicely. And just to add to that we're on Chemikal Underground (a music label), which I'm sure you'll know about, and they really like all the daft crazy stuff. From writing a band bio, point of view, it's quite interesting. If we say we're going to make a chocolate record, playable chocolate record they're like: "Right, that's great."

**B:** I was very interested in that story because I released a flesh coloured cardboard seven inch disc.

**Z:** Did you, when was that?

**B:** 1979.

**Z:** How many did you do?

**B:** I don't know, we gave them away with another record. I don't know how many we printed at that time; probably quite a lot, actually, because that was when people still bought vinyl. Those kinds of things you do resonate with me. So if there was one kind of emotion or driver to why you do what you do, what would that be?

**Z:** Music. We all really, really enjoy it. Even when we were at art school, we were trying to turn our art degrees into music degrees. Trying to get music into the work as much as possible.

**B:** There's a long British tradition of art school being the best place to develop bands.

**Z:** Totally.

**B:** There's that poem called *The Art School Dance Goes On Forever*, I don't know who wrote it. You're saying your successful strategy started with wilfully misusing your education.

**Z:** Yeah, absolutely.

**B:** Did your educational institution understand that in you misusing it, that might be a good result?

**Z:** They were just getting into that, but I tell you what, it's a lot different now than it was. I started art school in 1997 and back then they had three fine arts. I think it's way more open now, you've got new media and convergence media, time-based media, all these sub-genres. But back then they never had any of that. It was sculpture, painting and print-making. Each of the three guys that are in the band did a different fine art, different discipline. Sculpture were pretty good because everybody that wanted to do film making, anything like that, sound art, performance, went to sculpture because nobody else would have them. So they were quite open. But painting and print-making were the worst, they were totally traditional. So they didn't like any of that stuff. But we did all right, we all graduated.

**B:** Do you think if you were starting out now, you and your colleagues, would you actually sit there when you were leaving school and go: "I want to do a new media degree?" From what you're saying, college courses have caught up with your practice.

**Z:** We might have. For me, it was just get to art school. I mean, I was brought up in Hawick, I don't know if you know where that is, but it's a kind of shitty place, it was just about getting out of the town. But it's funny you asked that because we've actually done some teaching up at Dundee in the product design course which was quite weird. They just got in touch with us and said: "We love the stuff you do and the way you document it and we think our students would get a lot

out of that and all the hacking approach that you've got to your work." We were quite thrilled to go up and teach. We've done it a few times. Now, I think I would probably have liked to have done a course like they were doing because it's more all-encompassing. If they're interested in music they can go and build a music player or something like that. I think now I'd probably have gone down that route rather than the fine art route.

**B:** So you don't think, as some people would argue now, that those kinds of courses may be more open on one level, but on another level they're really getting more bolted down...

**Z:** Possibly. I think it depends on the folk driving the course. Because there was a guy called John Rogers, there was a really good team, there was a guy from a company in Liverpool, this guy called Pete Thomas who ran this company called Uniform who just decided to leave Liverpool, leave this, like we were talking about, client-based work, he hated that. So he left the company that he'd started and went and lived in East Neuk after seeing a documentary or a feature about the Fence Collective. He was like: "That looks like an easier life, let's go and do that." And started teaching. And then this guy John Rogers, who's this total brilliant academic mind, I think they drove the course to be a really good course and all the kids got a lot out of it. I don't know if it's as good now because I think that particular group of people have disbanded.

**B:** So it's about a people dynamic?

**Z:** I think it can be, yeah.

**B:** So when the collective was founded, did it have a start date or was the process one where you were working together and then you labelled it, as it were? What was the genesis?

**Z:** Going back to that multimedia exhibition that we dONE, we played at the opening and then we got booked to play in Sub Club which is a club in

Glasgow. And we were like: "Oh fuck, we need some kind of name." So we used this name Found even though we didn't really like it that much and it just ended up getting used. Then once we started getting more work, even though it was dribs and drabs, we decided we needed to go and do the business stuff, open a business bank account and register as a partnership and all that kind of thing. So it kind of just evolved out of necessity.

**B:** In your case that process of organising as a business has been very productive, I guess, or was having to register yourself as a partnership, get all the bank accounts...

**Z:** I quite enjoyed it at the time, but it's a bit of a nightmare now.

**B:** Why's that?

**Z:** I think because it's grown into a bigger thing. We're a partnership and one of the guys we've found is leaving because he's got a kid, so he's wanting to go and focus on that, so it's kind of left me holding it all. And I end up paying other guys and stuff. I mean, it's all right, I don't want to sound like I'm just moaning about the boring stuff.

**B:** These are the things that are interesting to tease out because it is challenging doing that kind of stuff. Understanding what the burdens are is interesting. You say the burden of business organisation has fallen on you?

**Z:** Yeah, exactly. Certainly in our day, and they don't do it now either from what I can tell, there's no training on that side of thing when you go to art school. They just want to concentrate on developing ideas. But really, the stuff that would be useful to learn would be how do you put applications for funding together? What's a good application? How do you register a company? When are you supposed to go self-employed? I'm actually having a phone meeting with one of your guys in Cultural Enterprise Office about this whole thing. I've used them in the past and will use them again. And like Business Gateway, used them in the beginning, got

like a little start-up grant off them. Didn't really get much advice off them.

**B:** So you formulated all this without training, before that your form of organisation was a band?

**Z:** Yeah.

**B:** So then what happened? Was it your success that forced some other kind of structure?

**Z:** Yeah, pretty much, yeah. I'll tell you what happened. I actually got in a bit of trouble because when I moved to Edinburgh I was getting, for a very short period of time, Housing Benefit until I found another job. And I'd ticked the wrong box and we got investigated. Me and my girlfriend got hauled into some office, wrists slapped. And after that I was like I need to make sure everything's done properly from now on. It wasn't long after that that I got in touch with the Business Gateway and got myself registered as a sole trader and then Found registered as a partnership.

**B:** Do you think, amongst your peers you are better organised or less well organised?

**Z:** I think we're quite well organised, actually.

**B:** I suspect so.

**Z:** It might just be because, compared to other bands, we've had to deal with bigger budgets and stuff. We got quite a big amount of money to do this project called Unravel, a collaboration with Aidan Moffat. So it's kind of like: "Fuck, you have to manage that amount of money and you're not really used to that." So maybe just because we've had to deal with that kind of stuff we're a little bit more on the ball, but I'm just comparing that to some of the bands that I know who are a bit more ramshackle, slapdash about things.

**B:** Yeah. Well, bands notoriously are. Partly because it's very easy to feel all that organisation is the enemy of the

soul of the band. If I was to have this conversation with other members of Found, would I get very different kind of answers? Is it diverse, how does that work?

**Z:** So there's four people. There's the professor.

**B:** Who has no name, he's just "the professor."

**Z:** The professor, Simon Kirby. His job obviously requires a lot of him but he puts a lot into Found as well, loves Found. Spoke about it at his inaugural Professorial lecture, which was quite amazing. And there's a guy called Kev who does some of the electronic stuff. He's a full-time barman so he doesn't have much to do with the management. Me and Tommy, who is the guy who's just had the kid, formed the partnership because we knew it was going to be me and him that were going to be the managers, if you like, of the whole project. If you spoke to Tommy you'd get pretty much the same answers.

**B:** That's because he has the same experience of it as you do.

**Z:** Yeah.

**B:** So one's a professor, one's a barman? That's an interesting range between a barman and a professor. So in a sense, that bar job and that professorship are part of the financing structure that allow Found to do what you do?

**Z:** Yeah, and also I work, albeit part-time, at the University. Another thing I should maybe mention is that the University are very supportive of the Found project and brand.

**B:** Directly?

**Z:** Directly. I don't know if they would be if Simon wasn't involved, the professor. But, Tim O'Shea, the principal of the University is a massive, massive fan of Cybraphon. And he just claimed it. Okay, it was funded by New Media Scotland, it wasn't directly funded by the University, but after we

built it and it got quite a lot of success, he just took it on as the University's own project. We were like: "Okay, fine, but we'd like to get something out of it as well." So what's happened in the end is they've given us a space to work in. So we've got a workshop, office kind of thing up in Dugald Stewart Building.

**B:** And that's a bartering arrangement in return for them sharing reputationally...

**Z:** We just mention we've been supported by the University of Edinburgh.

**B:** A bartering arrangement doesn't show up if you're doing your Business Gateway spreadsheet, it's quite difficult to put a proper value on that, but that's a kind of investment in you, as you say, and a valuable one alongside your other jobs. Do you think in terms of the hours you put in to Found, are you better paid when you're working at the University per hour or for Found?

**Z:** It's a good question. Now I always ask that question because I want to know when the time is right to stop working as a sound technician, and it's probably quite close just now, although it's never going to be a guaranteed income.

**B:** It's not, there's risk there. Your answer suggests, if I understand rightly, that certainly up until recently, probably per hour of your time, the other job puts a higher monetary value on your time than Found.

**Z:** Yeah.

**B:** That would be the experience of the others too?

**Z:** Yeah, I think so.

**B:** One of the things we're trying to do is get at how you map the economics of something like that, and of risk. From your own point of view, it's getting to the point where actually what you do through Found could put almost the same value.

**Z:** It'd put more, I think – now that we're getting into this client-based work. I'm kind of loathe to use that term, but it is more commercial work than...

**B:** Why are you loathe to use that term?

**Z:** Just because it sounds a bit wanky. It sounds a bit like we're a design agency in London or something.

**B:** Which you're not.

**Z:** Which we're not, yeah. And some of the meetings we've had with these people have kind of felt a bit like that, and we're not used to that world.

**B:** So this is a leading question, but in order to maintain your reputation, your reputational value, is there a point where you have to be cautious about this client based work because if you became just another, as you put it, design agency, that's not what you are?

**Z:** That's not what we are.

**B:** So what are you?

**Z:** When people asked us that, we used to say it depends on what we're trying to get money for. It depends what we're applying for, how we describe ourselves. Going back to that Red Stripe thing, one of the other reasons I didn't take it on was because there wasn't much room to do anything other than that very idea, the end result – a very definite idea and they wouldn't really move on it. So we were like: "We're not just wanting to be a technical team that just facilitates somebody else's ideas. We're very idea driven." But the thing we really like doing is the music because it keeps that balance between becoming a client-based operation. If you're doing records you're very much involved in that side of things as well. "I've got this idea, make a record, do three hundred copies and probably sell half of them." It's not a careerist thing, doing music these days. Or was it ever?

**B:** Well, the beauty of the music business in the UK is that lots of people got

involved with it, even in very different circumstances, for exactly the same reason that you're alluding to; that it's a way of potentially being in touch with a big audience but also being really self-determining, because as a business much of it respects and feeds that need for self-determination. You don't want a band that's going: "Well, we'll do what you want." No A&R man in any phase of the music business, no matter how controlling, has ever thought: "That's cool, they'll do what I want." You go because you're buying into some attitude or an approach or talent. Is Found something that might only ever have a short or a medium-term life?

**Z:** It's a funny time that you're asking that with Tommy leaving. I was getting to the point where I was thinking a lot about the brand and whether it's this ten-year cycle thing and we're getting to the end of it and we start trying to build something else out of it. Maybe we all just go by our own names and work together on various projects. I was thinking maybe it'd come to an end, but at the same time, Chemikal still want more albums. We've got a publishing thing with Domino – they want more records. So it would seem stupid. Our latest patrons, the whisky company, are totally like: "Let's talk about the next project." So it seems like we've built some long-term relationships that it'd be a bit foolish to just end it.

**B:** You call them "patrons."

**Z:** That's kind of how it's going these days though.

**B:** But that's a Victorian model recurring in this post-digital world?

**Z:** I often speak to Simon about it, it's kind of like the wealthy were kind of the only people who could afford art. It's interesting that the only people that can give us any money are, okay not wealthy individuals, but wealthy companies. I mean, Chemikal have no budget to facilitate some of our crazier ideas.

**B:** So when they're being patrons, do you

think that they actually see themselves in that role?

**Z:** I think they probably do, yeah. I think they probably do.

**B:** So do they give you some freedom?

**Z:** Very much so. The latest thing we're doing is a whisky tasting installation. So it's got whisky at the centre of it, but other than that it's: "Do whatever you want. Interpret it however you like." Something for them to take to the whisky fairs. So that's what I'm working on just now. But they've also funded a big album that was recorded in the art school last summer, where they brought Paul Savage and built a kind of pop-up studio in one of the sculpture studios, recorded a collaborative record while TEDGlobal (the international conference) was here. They were involved in that. I think they were the official sponsors of Ted. It's Dewar's. I've got the record, I should have brought you a copy, actually. But I've got it and there's not a logo anywhere, they're not into that heavy branding all over the place. They don't like that.

**B:** So they are acting as patrons in the classical sense.

**Z:** Yeah, totally. I mean I'm not squeamish about it at all. I think it's a different world now, and I think if they're willing to support my company then I'm totally happy to go along with it. As long as I don't end up doing something I don't want to do.

**B:** So if you're asked, if there was a nightmare form that said: "Tick this box: artist, businessman, craftsman"...

**Z:** For me or for Found?

**B:** Both, separately, they might be different.

**Z:** For Found I would just say it's an art and music collective. For me, it totally depends what I'm filling in, but just say artist and musician. I don't try and get into the finer details.

**B:** If a government, with a small “g”, wanted to interact with you and the collective, because they see a value in what you do the same way a whisky company has seen value, can you explain what the value is in what you do?

**Z:** No. I mean, you can’t quantify it in any way, all you can do is show people your portfolio. I mean it wasn’t even as considered as that with them. They just sort of found out about us.

**B:** Someone thought “this is cool”?

**Z:** Yeah. I guess they liked the ideas. I suppose, for them, if they were going to do what Red Stripe did, which is to go to a creative consultant agency, and then the creative consultant agency gets in touch with a bunch of artists and designers, and all of a sudden there’s tons of money required and probably nobody’s getting paid as much as they should because it’s being spread around – if they saw us and thought: “Right, there’s a direct line, we know them.” Their Global Brand Manager used to come to lots of Fence gigs and stuff and was a massive music fan of local Scottish stuff particularly. So that was the way in.

**B:** If you, as an articulate person, tell me you can’t articulate or measure what the value is in what you do, that is what you’re saying? I’m not challenging you, but that is what you’re saying, isn’t it?

**Z:** I wouldn’t know how to. We’ve never really needed to.

**B:** You’ve negotiated around the need to?

**Z:** Well yeah, or it’s just never really come up. I’m sure you’ll be aware of the funding application process, which we’ve done plenty of.

**B:** With what, Creative Scotland?

**Z:** Creative Scotland, Scottish Arts Council, New Media Scotland. There’s been other stuff, tons of stuff. And actually, what you’re trying to get is tiny sums of money, comparatively. I mean,

especially now that we’re all grown up and we’ve seen how much money goes around in the University, in the whisky world.

**B:** Different order of money.

**Z:** Completely. And when Simon got involved he couldn’t believe what we had to go through, the hoops we had to jump through to get a few grand.

**B:** Academia often has no idea of what tiny resources people outside of academia work with. It’s partly because to them a huge amount of the resources they use are invisible to them because there’s no single budget holder. So in those forms, are you required to articulate the value in what you do?

**Z:** You do at the end when you’re doing your monitoring report. You’ve got to say how many people saw Unravel, what was the footfall, what was your website hits? At the end you do, with the monitoring report. When you’re applying for it, we just try and brass it a little bit.

**B:** Because you’re not asked questions that you can answer?

**Z:** Not really. In the beginning they just want: “Tell us about yourself.” So you just say your big achievements, condense it all into a little digest.

**B:** But in terms of actually saying: “This is why this is worth doing”, you brass it.

**Z:** Yeah, it’d be hard. I know what you’re getting at, but I don’t know how we would say: “Use us over them.” Other than saying: “This is what we’ve done, here’s how our finished products look.”

**B:** So arguably, to properly assess the value or alternatively, the capabilities of yourself and the collective, the only meaningful way of doing that is taking time to assess your portfolio.

**Z:** Mm hmm. I don’t know how else you would do it.

**B:** Locally Creative Scotland loom quite large in these kind of conversations, but we don’t want this whole project to become about: “What does everyone think about Creative Scotland?” Because I don’t think that’s helpful to get bogged down in that. But presumably Creative Scotland are quite an important part of your world on some level.

**Z:** They’ve supported us. They have absolutely supported us. I mean, we got to go to South By Southwest, they part-funded that which was a very expensive thing. They supported our record which eventually came out on Chemikal Underground; we weren’t signed to them at the time. They supported two of our albums actually. Small amounts of money, but nonetheless we couldn’t have done it without that money.

**B:** If you project yourself back to that first installation at the RSA, were you by default ending up formalising a structure? How does what’s been achieved now look? Did you as a collective see yourselves going on some journey that looked anything like the journey you actually took? Or was it just “let’s go”?

**Z:** No, we did have an idea. It was a little bit like, you know the Factory Records catalogue idea, where they catalogued everything even if it wasn’t a record? Almost in a conceptual art kind of Martin Creed way, where even if somebody got their teeth fixed, they would give that a catalogue number. We kind of wholesale ripped that off in the beginning and just decided that the one way we could unify all these different projects was to give everything a catalogue number. So if we’d done a remix for somebody, that would get a catalogue number. If we done a record, it would get a catalogue number. Somebody got a tattoo, it would get a catalogue number – that kind of thing. So I kind of knew it was going to go that way. Eventually it became a bit of a hassle and nobody gave a fuck except us, so we gave up on that. But I knew it was always going to be: “Well, what’s going to come tomorrow? I wonder what kind of thing I’m going to be working on this

time next year?” And I still think like that. Like I wonder what thing I’m going to be working on next year.

**B:** So is the essence of Found an approach?

**Z:** I’d say it probably is.

**B:** That network that you have, I mean you haven’t labelled it “network”, but you’ve talked about lots of different topics and all of them involve a network; where has that come from?

**Z:** It’s just doing project after project. Somebody’ll pick up on something or somebody knows somebody else.

**B:** It’s incrementally acquired?

**Z:** Yeah, it is. And it’s very important. You couldn’t do what we do without a lot of the background support we get from people. Edinburgh Sculpture Workshop’s a great example. These are all long-term relationships. The whisky company is looking like it’s going to be long-term, the Chemikal thing’s long term. The thing with New Media Scotland who are the guys who commissioned Cybraphon, very long term.

**B:** Last question. You have suggested that each project drove you to become interested in or acquire new skillsets. Aside from when you’re at art college, have you were explicitly trained in anything, or is it something you acquire?

**Z:** I think I was the opposite when I was at art school, I think they kind of drew it out of you and sort of lost it a little bit. No, I’ve never done any formal training in anything, but we’ve had to learn on the hoof, on the fly the whole time whenever we do projects. They’re quite technology driven but I don’t know fucking anything about electronics but I constantly find myself sitting soldering trying to figure out voltage drops and all that.

**B:** You learn on the hoof?

**Z:** Totally. Because you’ve got an idea.

You know it’s doable.

**B:** How do you know it’s do-able?

**Z:** Because it is. They always are. They’re always doable. You come up with the most crazy idea you can, don’t be limited and then you figure out how to do it. Every time, that’s how we’ve done it.

**B:** So it’s doable because it’s an act of will?

**Z:** Yeah. I just think nobody’s that original. You think you’ve come up with a great idea and you go out and you’re like: “Nah, look, somebody’s done it kind of there, let’s take that little bit of the recipe.”

**B:** Tools to be found somewhere?

**Z:** Yeah. And I think that’s massively a part of the creative process now. I think that’s what people do. They just go out, it’s that kind of hack-sensibility. Take bits here and there and put it together until you’ve made things you want. It’s like plunder-phonics. I think it’s facilitated more with technology now.

**B:** I guess, in the modern world people are quite confused about originality and innovation. Are you innovative?

**Z:** Well, that’s what we get called but...

**B:** That’s why I’m asking the question. Are you innovative?

**Z:** Well, I think...

**B:** I’m not asking you: “Has somebody labelled you innovative?”

**Z:** I think we are in as much as you can be, but there’s our secret, I just gave it away. It’s all out there, even if it’s not been pieced together in the idea that you’ve got. It’s all out there somewhere. It’s no different than making music. All the little sequences, bits of composition have been done before. You’ve just got to kind of grab them, hope that it’s a little bit different, put a little bit of different fairy dust on it.

**B:** Perhaps that’s not that different from how things were in a different technological age?

**Z:** I think that’s fair enough. I meant with the technology-side, now it’s so accessible. The stuff that we use to drive entire installations are little logic boards that cost twenty quid.

**B:** Do you use, what’s that little computer...

**Z:** The Dweeno or the Raspberry Pi or the new ones, yeah.

**B:** Amazing little things.



# 10

**Inge Sørensen's  
Literature Review**





Literature review of

# **the definition, size and turnover of the creative industries and micro-businesses in Scotland**

Preliminary research

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## Introduction

This research seeks to review, evaluate and clarify the findings of five reports in relation to the discussion paper *Creative Industries in Scotland. Micro-businesses, Access to Finance and the Public Purse* by Bob Last for the Cultural Enterprise Office.

The aim of the research is to clarify:

### 1. Definitions

- a. Explain key terms and definitions of creative industries, both those used in the reports as well as those used by the Cultural Enterprise Office (in the following CEO).
- b. Investigate the evolution and development (or not) of the EU definition of micro-businesses.

### 2. Scale and turnover

- a. Determine the scale of the creative industries in Scotland in terms of number of companies as well as turnover, and in particular businesses or practices that fall within the EU definition of a micro-business.

### 3. High growth companies

- a. Determine, if possible, how many high growth businesses there are in Scotland within the creative industries.
- b. Re-evaluate high growth parameters in relation to creative businesses.

## Methodology

This report is based on desk research providing a literature review of the findings of recent reports, four about the creative industries and one about high growth businesses, in Scotland.

The reports are:

*Creative Financing: feasibility study into financial mechanisms for supporting small-scale creative activity in Scotland.* By BOP Consulting for Shetland Arts with support from Mission Models Money, Creative Scotland and Highlands and Islands Enterprise, 2011. (Referred to in the following as BOP).

*Creative Growth Regional Mapping.* By TBR economic research and business intelligence for the Institute of Creative Industries, Edinburgh Napier University, 2011. (Referred to in the following as Napier).

*Cultural Economy Support Research: Final Report.* By the Training and Employment Research Unit (TERU), University of Glasgow for Creative Scotland. (Referred to in the following as TERU).

*Economic Contribution Study: An Approach to the Economic Assessment of the Arts & Creative Industries in Scotland Final Report.* DC Research for Creative Scotland, 2012. (Referred to in the following as DC Research).

*High Growth Firms in Scotland.* Scottish Enterprise and Hunter Centre for Enterprise, University of Strathclyde, 2010. (Referred to in the following as following Strathclyde).

## Definitions

### Classification and definitions of A&CI

CEO currently bases its definition of the Arts and Creative industries (A&CI) on the DCMS' list of thirteen creative subsectors: advertising, architecture, arts and antique markets, computer and video games (DCMS' 'Interactive leisure software'), craft, design, designer fashion, film and video, music, performing arts, publishing, software and computer services, television and radio.

All five reports largely adhere to the DCMS' tone and overall definition of the creative industries. However, the precise definition of the creative industries varies in each report. Each report modifies and reinterprets the subsectors included in their respective definition of the creative industries, as well as which SIC codes are represented in these subsectors. What exactly constitutes A&CI is a perennial and ongoing debate amongst cultural commentators, academics, policy makers and statisticians. This is acknowledged in most of the reports and is evidenced by Nesta's proposed new definitions of the creative industries as well as the DCMS' current open consultation: 'Classifying and measuring the creative industries: Consultation on proposed changes.'

Also, each report uses different methodology and datasets to determine the scale of A&CI in Scotland. The Napier and TERU reports use 2009 figures while DC Research also draws on data from 2010.

These differences account for the variation in estimates of the size and turnover of the creative industries in the reports.

### Variations in classification and definitions of A&CI in the five reports

Napier focuses on A&CI in Edinburgh but also offers estimates for Scotland. Its definition of A&CI is similar to that of DCMS but also includes a heritage category. The data of the Napier report is based on TBR's longitudinal dataset Trends Central Resource (TCR), part of the TBR Observatory, which records nearly 3.5 million live firms in the UK and enables the identification of businesses at the firm level. The TCR Observatory database is weighted with BIS SME statistics to capture non-employing entities.

DC Research sets out to assess the contribution of the A&CI to the Scottish economy. This report expands DCMS' thirteen subsectors to reflect the arts and cultural industries and practices specific to Scotland. DC Research adds heritage and cultural education as subsectors and lists photography as a separate category; taking the subsectors to sixteen. These are: advertising, architecture, visual arts, crafts, design, fashion & textiles, performing arts, music, photography, film and video, computer games, radio and TV, writing and publishing, heritage, software/electronic publishing, cultural education.

DC Research's classification has informed the Scottish Government's definition of A&CI in Scotland. However, the Scottish Government operates with a library and archives category rather than a heritage subsector and adjusted the methodology of the measurement of the games sector in May 2013.

The TERU report seeks to identify the business development support needs of A&CI businesses in relation to Creative Scotland's Cultural Economy Programme. The report bases itself on DCMS' SIC codes but collapses DCMS' thirteen categories into eleven: advertising, architecture, art and antiques, crafts, design, designer fashion, film, video and photography, music, visual and performing arts, publishing, software, electronic publishing, digital, entertainment media, and television and radio.

BOP explores the need for loans based financing for micro-organisations and practitioners in Shetland and focuses on seven of the DCMS' subsectors: visual arts, crafts, music, digital arts, performing arts, publishing, design and illustration.

The Strathclyde report centres on high growth firms and not on A&CI *per se*. It therefore does not focus on classifying a particular industrial section. In this report, no micro-businesses in Scotland qualify as high growth businesses according to the EU definition because all businesses mentioned in this report have over 10 employees.

### Principal differences

The principal differences between the groupings and categorisations between the four reports that deal specifically with the creative industries (Napier, DC Research, TERU and BOP) are in the following areas:

#### Music, visual and performing arts

Napier and DC Research split music, visual and performing arts into separate categories, whereas TERU brackets these into one. CEO, in line with DCMS, already differentiates between these arts forms. This is meaningful as the practises and needs differ between musicians, visual and performing artists.

#### Crafts

TERU, in line with DCMS, does not provide statistics for crafts although 'crafts' does figure as a category. Both Napier and DC Research mention crafts as a particularly relevant and vibrant sector in Scotland. Both reports therefore further define and include statistics for this category.

#### Heritage and libraries

CEO, BOP and TERU, basing themselves on DCMS categories, do not have a library or heritage category. Napier has a heritage category that includes libraries, archives, historic sites and museums. The DC Research report has a libraries and archives category, but does not include historic sites and museums.

#### Cultural education

DC Research further includes cultural education as a creative industry category and estimates the number in this category to be 400. Many arts educators work either as sole traders or as part of micro-businesses (for example the social inclusion filmmaking scheme *Diversity Films* (now defunct) or the 18 Media Access Centres in Scotland). Therefore CEO may want to consider including this category in its definition of the creative industries.

DC Research also takes higher and further education staff with creative categories as their subject matter into account. The report lists 950 of the 2390 higher and further education staff under the category software publishing in its statistics. As higher and further education staff are often employed by their respective institutions, and therefore are neither sole traders nor operate as micro-businesses, it makes less sense to include these in a CEO's definition of A&CIs.

### Software, games, electronic publishing and digital entertainment

TERU aggregates DCMS' games and software subsectors into one category: Software, electronic publishing, digital and entertainment media.

Napier has a software category (13,030) as well as the subcategory digital publishing under the publishing category (there is no breakdown of numbers).

DC Research differentiates between the computer games (200/600) and software/electronic publishing (19,100) subsectors. The estimate for the games industry has been increased from 200 to 600 following a reassessment of the methodology in this report in a note by the Scottish Government in May 2013.

### Note on SIC codes

SIC codes provide an estimate of the activities within industry sectors and statistics to analyse these with. However, as evidenced by the variations above, the classification of subsectors varies, as do the SIC codes included in these subsectors. Also, it should be noted that statistics based on SIC codes only measures the principal activity of a registered company or enterprise and therefore may not adequately reflect the real life practices and work patterns of creative practitioners or enterprises, who will often occupy several roles simultaneously or carry out a variety of services as part of their business. Also SIC codes by themselves do not say anything about whether the company is dormant or active.

### The EU Commission's definition of micro-businesses

The EU Commission defines a micro-business or micro-enterprise as: 'an enterprise which employs fewer than 10 persons and whose annual turnover and/or annual balance sheet total does not exceed EUR 2 million.'

This definition is based on Commission Recommendation 2003/361/EC of the 6th of May 2003 concerning the definition of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises. The recommendation came into force on the 1st of January 2005, and it replaced the definition laid down in Commission Recommendation 96/280/EC, in order to reflect changes in inflation and productivity since 1996.

There is no internationally recognised definition of micro-businesses and classifications vary nationally. For example, in the US Small Business Administration defines a micro-business as: 'an organization with less than five employees, small enough to require little capital (\$35,000 or less) to get started.' (SBA, 2009)

CEO currently adopts the EU's definition of micro-enterprises.

### Size of the creative industries and micro-businesses in Scotland

In the discussion paper Creative Industries in Scotland: Micro-businesses, Access to Finance and the Public Purse, Bob Last makes the point that there is a difference between practitioners motivated by cultural acclaim and esteem, and those motivated by financial gain. Last notes that most practitioners within the creative industries place themselves on a spectrum between these two poles. Those motivated solely by cultural esteem are unlikely to have aspirations and/or potential for business development or growth and therefore fall outside the remit of the CEO. Nevertheless, some of these will still operate and be registered as micro-businesses. It is not possible to ascertain the motivations of practitioners and micro-businesses from the statistics

presented in the five reports. Further qualitative research would need to be conducted to estimate the size of this group.

Last also observes that the role of the sole practitioner in the creative industries is substantial and that some within this category are or may grow into micro-businesses. In this context, it should be noted that one-man-bands, where the only employee is the director, as well as companies employing fewer than ten staff, fall within the EU definition of a micro-enterprise. This has informed the following analysis.

### The creative industries

Viewing the findings of the reports as a whole, there is some correlation between the estimates of three of the reports, Napier, TERU and DC Research,<sup>1</sup> in their estimations of the creative industries as a whole. These reports base themselves on different datasets, and therefore this correlation may go some way to suggest reliability in the overall measurements of the creative industries in Scotland.

CEO's definition of the creative industries currently does not include the heritage nor cultural education subsectors. Figures from these sectors have therefore been deducted in the following.

The Napier report estimates that there are 81,000 enterprises in the creative industries in Scotland based on figures

<sup>1</sup> The Strathclyde report does not focus on creative micro-businesses and therefore does not provide statistics for those. BOP estimates the number of creative businesses in Scotland to be 17500 practitioners and micro-organisations (p. 6) or 16000 (p.10). However, the aims and methodology (case study, questionnaire and steering group) of the BOP report differs from that of the other four reports and the sources of its data is unclear. This might account from the disparate numbers both internally within the report itself and in relation to the findings of other reports. The statistics from these two reports have therefore been disregarded in this section.

from 2009 (p 14.) Excluding the heritage subsector (7,330), this figure falls to 73,670. According to the DC Research report, based on figures from 2009 and 2010, direct employment in the A&CI in Scotland in 2010 was 84,400. Excluding heritage (10,700) and cultural education (400) this figure is 73,300. Adding the additional 400 enterprises in the games industry, as recommended by the note on methodology by the Scottish Government in May 2013, the total figure comes to 73,700.

The majority of these are non-employing enterprises – Napier suggests over 75% in some subsectors – which is a higher proportion than any other growth sector in the UK or Scotland.

#### Measurements of employment and micro-businesses in the creative industries

There are discrepancies between estimates of the number of businesses in A&CI in Scotland, which is partly due to differences in definitions and datasets and partly due to the fact that the measurements are from different years.

Napier estimates there were 20,675 creative industries firms in Scotland in 2009. In the City of Edinburgh 27% (900 out of 3280) of these were employing (p. 17). Extrapolated nationally, this gives 5582 enterprises. In his discussion paper, Last notes that this proportion is likely to be lower outside the Central Belt. However, this report does not provide data pertaining specifically to micro-businesses and it is not possible to ascertain which proportion of enterprises falls into the micro-enterprise definition.

The Scottish Government's Economic Strategy Key Sectors for 2010 lists 9005 businesses in the creative industries that were either VAT registered or making PAYE payments, of these 3690 were employing enterprises. However, this measurement is of businesses with between one and 49 employees, and the data does not allow for an estimate of the number of micro-businesses.

Based on the DCMS' definition of the creative industries as well as a survey of 726 A&CI businesses, TERU estimates that there were 4,800 businesses in the creative industries in Scotland in 2011. Of these 4,080 (85%) are either sole traders with one employee, or micro-businesses and in this way these fall within the EU definition of a micro-business. Only 1% of the 4800 companies were non-employing.

Because of the discrepancies in findings, methodology and datasets between the reports, as well as the general lack of data about micro-businesses available, it would be reasonable to conduct further quantitative and qualitative research into the scale and turnover of micro-businesses in the creative industries in Scotland.

#### Proposed methodology to assess the proportion of the creative industries that falls within the EU micro-business definition

In order to provide a meaningful measure of the scale of micro-businesses in Scotland, the CEO may:

- consider if the CEO's definition of the creative industries should be maintained or adapted in line with the Scottish Government's, Nesta's or the DCMS' revised definition when it becomes available.
- determine which SIC codes should be included in the subsectors of this definition.
- decide whether companies where the director is the only employee, should fall into the CEO's understanding of a micro-business, and therefore would be eligible for investment or support from CEO. If this group is not eligible for support, the CEO will need to make an addendum to its definition of micro-businesses, as this group is currently included in the EU's definition of micro-businesses.

- obtain statistics for the size and turnover of micro-enterprises in Scotland based on these parameters, for example through TCR Observatory database (excluding the BSI SME index).
- conduct further qualitative research to ascertain which proportion of micro-enterprises that has genuine growth aspirations and potential.

#### Turnover

There is also some discrepancy between the approximate turnover of the A&CI annually. Again, this is due to differences in datasets and definitions. Napier sets the turnover of Scotland's A&CI to £6.84 billion (of this heritage is 3.2%) based on 2009 figures, and total GVA to £3,488 million (of this heritage is 3%). DC Research estimates that the turnover is £6.3 billion (GVA £3.2billion) based on 2010 figures. In these reports there are no data on the turnover of micro-businesses.

In the TERU report 26% of businesses declined to provide their turnover in the last financial year and 29% claimed not to know. This lack of data makes it impossible to achieve a reliable or accurate estimate of the turnover.

It is not possible to determine the turnover of creative micro-businesses on the basis of the statistics available in the five reports.

#### Creative industries as a growth sector

The report High Growth Firms in Scotland mentions some of the difficulties with the definition of high growth businesses and questions the usefulness of high growth parameters as a measurement of a successful industry or business environment. Of the companies listed in this report none are micro-businesses and the finding of the report therefore falls outside of the scope of the CEO.

Recently, there appears to have been a reorientation from a high growth agenda and terminology towards a more general focus on sustaining growth sectors. This is reflected in for example the Scottish Government's growth sector strategies and its focus on 'increasing sustainable economic growth' (2009b).

Also, there are calls for a more industry specific understanding of the creative industries and their specific needs and practices. This is reflected on a regional level by the Napier report (p. 20), on a national level with the Scottish Government identifying the creative industries as one of seven distinct growth sectors, and on a European level as evidenced by, for example, the European Creative Industries alliance.

This is also in recognition of the larger social, artistic and educational value of the creative industries, which is hard to determine in purely economic terms. In addition to the obvious cultural and artistic value of these industries, A&CI provide training and career development opportunities; increase activities in other industries, for example tourism, and create local hubs of increased growth, collaboration and productivity.

### Summary

Across the reports, there are variations in the definitions of what precisely are the creative industries. CEO's definition of the creative industries currently does not include the heritage nor cultural education subsectors, which figure as categories in, for example, the Scottish Government's definition. Adhering to the CEO's definition, and cross-referencing the findings of the reports, there are around 73,700 enterprises registered with Companies House in the creative industries in Scotland. Of these, and according to TERU, there are 4080 businesses that fall within the EU's definition of a micro-business.

There has been no change to the EU Commission's definition of a micro-enterprise since 2007.

In the five reports there is limited data specifically about the size of micro-businesses in the arts and creative industries in Scotland. There are no reliable statistics on the turnover of micro-businesses. Because of the discrepancies in findings, methodology and datasets between the reports, as well as the inadequate data about micro-businesses available, this research recommends that further quantitative and qualitative research is conducted in order to provide a meaningful estimate of the size and turnover of micro-businesses in the creative industries in Scotland. In doing so the CEO may:

- consider if the CEO's definition of the creative industries should be maintained or adapted in line with the Scottish Government's, Nesta's or the DCMS' revised definition when it becomes available.
- determine which SIC codes should be included in the subsectors of this definition.
- obtain statistics for the size and turnover of micro-enterprises in Scotland based on these parameters, for example through the TCR Observatory database (excluding the BSI SME index). This database of live firms appears to provide data on a more granular level than datasets based on information from Companies House. This dataset is therefore more likely to provide the statistics about micro-businesses in the creative industries in Scotland, that CEO requires.
- conduct further qualitative research to ascertain which proportion of micro-enterprises that has genuine growth aspirations and potential.

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