

Experience with Flotilla Project, What Community means, Reflections on East London, Female Role Models, Histories of Liberation, Relationship with the Water

Flotilla Oral Histories

Participant: Mala Yamey

Interviewer: Dr. Anna Maguire

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AM: So, OK, here we go. All right. So today is the 5th of June, 2023, and it's 12 o'clock. And this interview is being carried out online. I'm Dr. Anna Maguire, lecturer in public history at UCL and today I am interviewing...

MY: Mala Yamey, I am Associate Curator at Invisible Dust.

AM: Brilliant. Thank you Mala and thank you very much for talking to us today.

MY: So as you know, this oral history project is to talk to those who've been involved with the flotilla artwork at the Royal Docks. So I wondered if you could tell us a little bit about your connection to the Royal Docks and whether it started with this project.

AM: Sure. So I, before this project, I had actually only been to the Royal Docks once for the Excel Centre. So this was a real introduction to the Royal Docks in Newham for me.

MY: Brilliant. And how did you end up getting involved? What was Invisible Dust's role in this project?

AM: So personally I joined the project a few, maybe a month or two after Invisible Dust had been appointed as artistic directors for Sea Change. Invisible Dust applied and was appointed to be artistic directors of Sea Change by the Royal Docks team in partnership with UCL East and, and yeah, so we curated and selected the artists and worked with them on their commissions.

MY: Brilliant. And what was that experience like of choosing the artworks that we're going to feature in this festival?

AM: So it was actually really exciting. We did two quite intense days of studio visits. We met more artists than we could choose. We actually had a very long list to start with and then I think, I can't remember how many artists we met, but it was definitely more than the four we ended up selecting. And it was definitely thinking, because when we started our research we were looking at the histories of the Royal Docks, we were looking at the UCL research who had come into the project and we were looking at the sustainability focus of the season. So we had to kind of marry this like research into the histories, the UCL existing research interests, who had like come to us to want to talk about the project, with the sustainability season of looking at how can we kind of make people think differently about climate change in the area of the Royal Docks. So when we were choosing artists we had to be very mindful of these themes. So we divided, sorry that is going backwards, but we divided those kind of triangulation of research into four themes and we were going under... Melanie's film came under urban futures and thinking about the histories of activism in the area, and then how that goes

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towards the improved urban futures in the Royal Docks and wider. Simon Faithfull's work came under biodiversity and thinking around the current entanglement of species that have been in the Royal Docks through barges to those who had already, I mean it was a marshland before, so lots of different kind of natural species. The Rax Media collective work was, which we ended up selecting obviously each of these under the themes, but was thinking around the connections to world history and colonialism and all of the different countries who kind of were brought into the Royal Docks through the boats going out from the Royal Docks and then Dana Olarescu's work was thinking around energy use and this builds into that historic interest as well from sail to steam that encouraged the building of the Royal Docks, so I don't know if that makes sense but those four themes kind of are the way we decided the artists.

AM: Yeah that's great, so Melanie's work as you said, kind of came under this urban futures banner. What was it about Melanie's proposal that was particularly exciting to the team at Invisible Dust?

MY: So when, Alice Sharp, who's our director, she had worked with Melanie before, so she's already a big fan, and when we went to Melanie's studio she showed a strong interest in and previous experience of working with women and kind of really working with women to get their voice across. So it's a really collaborative practice and since we really wanted to have a very strong community engagement feel for the artwork as well, we knew she'd she's delivered and would be able to win, you know, she's very good at what she does in that way. And we were very excited by this film about, I can't remember the name of it, but snow ploughs moving around in the dark, in the snow, where she choreographed these, what you don't see, the invisible labour of the people who clean up the slopes before everyone starts skiing in the next morning. And she choreographed them with this very kind of beautiful music and moving around in these dances. And so that all came in to when she brought, sort of speaking to us about it, she kind of, I mean she's spoken about this before, but she was really interested by what could she do about women and water. And then having come across this research around the absence of women on boats until 1990 on moving vessels, it just kind of felt like a perfect way of bringing in that invisible labour again and telling the stories and putting women back into the narrative.

AM: Great, so the kind of theme of women's involvement and women's empowerment has been a really prominent part of this piece and the work around it. For you, what was it like to kind of join together with so many women, both kind of in the film and behind the scenes, to work on this project?

MY: So I think when we were both there, the first meeting with all of the local women participants, not all of them ended up being in the film, but a lot of them did, was such a, I mean we didn't know if we'd get women to go on boats in the water at night. But the way that Mermey kind of corralled everyone together and then just even just listening to, we'd done the research, but listening to the stories that each woman was able to give was so inspiring and just, it went from a football coach to a woman who'd been involved in the Silvertown activism and it all just really felt very strongly around the area and around being in this film and all had ideas. And I mean, it ended up happening, but like Halima had wanted to put her bike on a boat. She was like, I need to put my bike on a boat and ended up putting her bike on a boat. So it was just really inspiring going from that like women's meeting to then having the women boat owners and boat kind of association meeting where all the women were saying like, oh, but actually how's this gonna work? And it kind of being brought back to reality to the day of filming, which was so, like, it just came together really, really well. And everyone was excited. And I mean, you had a judge doing the Windy Pandas warm up, going up and down. And everyone just like, I mean, even until the end of the shoot, when it was freezing cold and it was really late and everyone was tired, still being able to be like, yeah, we'll get back on the water, we'll keep going. And I think it's just a really amazing collective effort of, I mean, majority of women working, not working, but getting involved.

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AM: Yeah, absolutely. And I guess on the day of filming itself, I suppose with this project, different from the other artists' work, it was on the water and involved in the water. How was that for you to see it kind of come to life and be there for the whole day of filming?

MY: It was really exciting because actually before the day of filming we'd worked on, Melanie and I had actually gone on a boat trip. We'd actually been able to go on the water and the boat actually ended up, what's the word... breaking down. So we had to be tugged. But we'd gone through and the magnificence, but also the size and the sheer scale of the docks doesn't come across until really you're on the water, because you're just, I don't, I mean you feel it because you have to walk around it and it's really far to go from A to B, but actually being on the water, just like being surrounded by it was really, really magical. And so then actually seeing the film like come together and all the women like on the boats and they'd also none of the rowers had rowed at night for example. So it's just really a special experience I think to be a part of. It was a long day, it was exhausting but it felt really really rewarding.

AM: Yeah that's great and was being around the docks and kind of having that experience I guess of both being on the water and around that space, did it change your perception of the docks over time? Was it different from maybe how you'd imagined it to be when you were doing your research?

MY: It's hugely different because you look at it from photos and you only go to like one point and you don't really get a sense of it and you don't feel like how important it is for London without I think actually being on the water or watching the filming and being on the bridge and just I think there's like an element of like actually interacting with the water makes it more real and more makes the Royal Docks more like the sense of why it was important comes back to you as well it was a used space it was a... I mean, it used to be full of ships. And so it obviously is empty now, I mean it's not empty, you have small ships, but I think that importance of what it was and then also the shame of why, I mean, I know the World Dock team and the Cultural Center are trying to make it into something again, but it's a shame that it's become a little bit forgotten by the rest of London. And I mean, in the film, you see it, but even when we were watching the film, you had Canary Wharf in the background and with the lights of that city, which is such a prominent part of London, but then there's this whole huge area which people don't come to and don't really know about, what I didn't know about, and most people don't, who I've spoken to, except for the ones who are actually in it. So it's, I've forgotten your question, but I don't know if I answered it.

AM: No, that's great. And I think it leads on to the next thing I want to talk to you a bit about, which is how's it been taking the film out now that it's edited and it's in the world, both as part of Sea Change Festival and possibly other things. What's it been like to kind of go and see the film come to life?

MY: I guess it's a really different experience from seeing, because as the Invisible Dust team we got to see, and the Royal Docks Team we got to see on our laptops, and then seeing it in the shed, which was custom built for it, it's because we got these subwoofer sound, like proper speakers, and because Melanie's created such a wonderful soundtrack with it, I think, and being immersed in darkness just as like the film is in darkness, it just brought a completely different interaction with it. We also showed it at Forecast, which was the symposium we did mid May, on the 19th May, and that was on screens, and it was a very light space. It was a really, really beautiful film, but that same feeling of being in the dark and having the sound kind of surround you really encouraged a lot of people actually to go and see the film as long as they could in the Thames Barrier Park.

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AM: Yeah, great. And maybe a last question about what the sort of impact of the film has been for you. Do you think this will encourage you to go back to the Royal Docks area and Thames Barrier Park and kind of, has it changed how you feel about that part of London now? I know it's not where you live but do you get a different sense of the kind of the community there and the kind of energy there?

MY: I think definitely feel like I have a piece of own- ownership is the wrong word, um a piece of... I'm don't know how to explain it. I feel like it's a piece of mine, like I have a much stronger connection to it because I know much about the history, I've spoken to the people, I've been there and produced something there. I feel like it's a place that, it's far away, don't get me wrong, I'm not going to be going there regularly, but even today I was looking at the London Festival of Architecture email that came out and it was talking about the People's Plan, which I looked at in my research and I was like, oh, that looks like something I might want to go. So I think like my interest, my research interests are definitely kind of like tied into it a bit more. Like I was even looking today at an artist who's showing at the Liverpool Biennial and she's talking about Lascars in her work. So I was like, oh, yes, I know about that from the Royal Docks. I think it's something that, I don't think your research into something ever really goes, and or your interaction with something, and I'm sure relationships with Invisible Dust, for example, and the Royal Docks team will continue, but whether I'll go there regularly, I'm not sure it is far, but personally in research interests, I think it's definitely definitely going to stay with me.

AM: Has it changed about how you feel about water more generally? Have you got any urge to get back on a boat?

MY: I actually wanted to go swimming in there. You've done it yourself, haven't you? I looked at the, I saw there was an Instagram post about a 5k in the Royal Docks, like free swimming bit. And I was like, that looks like a very, quite a nice place to go swimming so maybe just but in water in general I've always loved water. One of my favourite activities is swimming so I think but I definitely feel like being on a water a boat in London is a very kind of different experience and I like the only other time I was on the Thames was when, do you remember those yellow bus boats? The duck boat? Like for children's birthday parties. I feel like I hadn't been on the Thames in such a long time. The other thing that changed my perception of was that, because we worked with, we took a boat from Rodmer, which is the Royal Docks Water Management Authorities, and we saw the kind of barrier, not barrier, it's the locks kind of changing and going up and down. I was kind of aware of the, and bringing back the idea of invisible labour, there's so many jobs that people do that we don't know about, which is really fascinating, just learning about the man who changes the bridge to go check how, and also thinking about how this city with water, it runs through it all, but those points which are all the way in the East End, actually stop us from flooding. And if they if they don't work, which they have to test and keep replacing, we literally could all be underwater. That was really quite powerful as well, the relationship with that.

AM: Yeah, really changing your perception of what London is and its geography. That's really interesting. I'm just going to move towards a slightly different angle of questioning, which is that as we sort of talked about already, your research was thinking about the history of the Docklands as a place for women's liberation and labour rights and kind of an area of protest and a big area of Melanie's film was thinking about women as leaders, whether kind of recognised as such, or just sort of quietly getting on with that work. So I wanted to know, first of all, has that history, has learning more about that history had an impact on the kinds of questions and things that you're interested in as a researcher and a curator going forward?

MY: Interesting question. Definitely the idea of invisible labour and those people who do the things that no one talks about but make such a big impact with what they do is something that will stay with me, I think. I mean, in

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terms of the specific activist histories and also my connection to South Asia as well. I think something that has been like niggling on wanting to find out more about is definitely the suffragette Sophia Dilip Singh and understanding more. So it's like specific figures. I'd say probably my interests are less about women's history and more about that South Asian connection just because of my own personal family connections. But definitely, like, who's doing... I mean, the other thing that came out from the research, which was really interesting when we started, was that Mahatma Gandhi and Charlie Chaplin met in the Royal Docks, and it inspired his film Living Times. So it's all these funny connections and meeting points that the Royal Docks have facilitated really does that, don't they?

AM: Yeah, that's interesting, yeah, to think about that kind of, that long history of people coming together in interesting ways in that space. And then a final question, who have been the women leaders in your life who have inspired or motivated you?

MY: It's lame to say, definitely my mum. But she's done so much with her life and she's inspired me because she's chopped and changed her career so much and kind of just like always started from the beginning but just showed like you're not stuck in anything and she does everything for us. She's a very strong woman. Who else? It's hard to say. There's lots of amazing women who've done... I'm not answering this very well. Let's look at my bookshelf. You know who I find very inspiring is Aleph Shafak and her writing and also I think maybe women writers. I'm tending to read more women writers and that's what's inspiring me. So people like Aleph Shafak or Katie Kitamura. So I think women who are talented, I think we're, as women, we're able to like touch on things a little bit more sensitively because we think around things more sensitively. So I think women authors who are doing really impactful and like, I mean, Elif Shafak, for example, is talking about Cyprus versus the most recent book is talking about Cyprus and Turkey versus Greece and also talking about climate change. She's putting all this into these stories that we, it's some people could look at it as just a book of fiction, but actually she's touching on so much more. So yeah, maybe I would say authors like Elif Shafak and Katie Kitamura are very inspiring women for me.

AM: Brilliant. And I think that fits because you're a storyteller too.

MY: Yes.

AM: OK. Well, thank you so much for your time today. Before we finish, is there anything that I haven't asked you about that you'd like to say?

MY: I think not.

AM: OK. Well, without further ado, then, I'll bring this interview to a close. Thank you very much.

MY: Thank you.

AM: We'll stop recording.