

Transcript of HoGCast: Conversations over a Brew

Episode One: James and Fox on art and mental health

This podcast was recorded sat on a sofa, in a bell tent in the Madlove Take Over Festival venue, which was the old Argos store on Church Street, St Helens, on Saturday 14th December 2019

This recording is 32:26 minutes long.

F - When did we first meet. You have a different recollection to I. I think we've had this conversation, but you see... When did we first meet, James?

J - We met at the Heart of Glass conference in the working men's club, *With.For.About*, in May last year. Is that right?

F - No

J - Oh dear!

F - (Laughs) I don't know, I think, I think I had this conversation with you. I had saw you at the Live Art Development Agency in.

J - *Last Night Art Saved My Life*

F - Yeah, I think I seen you perform, or do a ta-, you.

J - A thing.

F - A thing. And then I came up to meet Patrick Fox, of Heart of Glass to have a chat and he said I think you need to go and see James, he's doing a performance in the Vegan Cafe in St Helens.

J - Oh Yeah

F - The thunderstorm where Dorris hid under the table.

J - Leica

F - Leica? Was that not, was Dorris not there too?

J - No it was Emily's dog, not my dog.

F - Oh ok, ohhhh.

J - You're right, I remember.

F - Yeah

J - I remember now.

F - Yeah

J - I found that event a bit weird. So I don't, I've kind of blocked it out of my head.

F - Uhhh, for me that event, 'cause I guess first impressions as well. I came to that and I was quite nervous of coming to talk to you and kind of, say.

J - Shall we say what that event was so it has some context.

F - Oh yes, do, do that. I forget I forget.

J - So Heart of Glass do this thing called '*I Heart Thursday*' where artists they work with come and like share a film, and I showed this like, video diary piece that I made of a project I did called '*The Ship of Fools*' which is when I turned my council flat in to a mental health hospital for 28 days. But it's a really. I mean I like that piece, I think that's one of my better, like, projects or whatever, but it's, it's pretty hardcore. It goes there.

F - Yeah it does.

J - And it doesn't pull its punches.

F - No

J - And it's got a really tragic ending.

F - Yeah

J - So I think when I present it, it, I don't really like doing it, but I see the value in it. That's why I can't remember the bits around it because it's like, I remember meeting somebody from MOMO's.

F - Yeah, there was a-

J - And a vegan muffin

F - Vegan muffin, I remember the thunderstorm, as we said. Umm, so I'd come to that, and I, I think talked a bit about being in a hospital.

J - You talked about?

F - No, you talked a bit about, would you have talked in that piece?

J - Probably

F - Yeah, and I was like, 'Hang on, I'm a mental health nurse, where do I fit into this? Can I, could I do something, could I offer something of value to your work or what you do, or just, you know' but still apprehensive because I felt maybe that I was

J - The enemy

F - The enemy, yeah of course

J - Let's call a spade a spade

F - Yeah (laughs)

J - Yeah

F - Ummm, and I was like OK, I came up and I sat next to you on those, there were like little wooden blocks, can you remember?

J - Yeah

F - And I was like 'I'm a mental health nurse'

J - (Laughs) And I said 'Don't section me' (Laughs)

F - Yeah (Laughs) 'But I'm an artist too and I feel there might be something or something I could offer I don't know' I was a bit like (deep breath) like

J - Yeah

F - And I think you were a bit, I felt like you were a bit apprehensive as well maybe, potentially

J - Well, possibly, I won't, I won't deny that. I also like, if people talk to me after my work, I don't really like it.

F - Ok

J - Because I I f-, I don't know why.

F - Ok. I guess guess it's like, when I've seen you talk, or do your your work and that, it's what it what for me comes out, it's very emotive and emotional right?

J - Exactly

F - It's like

J - And it, so, I used to do this piece called '*Mental*', which is which was like my autobiographical piece when I read all my mental health records. And when I was making it and artist called Kim Noble helped me make it, and he said to me, it was really good advice 'You should definitely not see the audience afterwards, you really have to protect yourself, because you're gonna like really open yourself up and that's of value to people but you can't save people, you can't become people's therapists, and if you open yourself up that, that will happen people will come to you and like'.

F - Yeah

J - like, share, and some people will offload, not just share but offload so, and you, you'll last like two minutes'.

F - Yeah

J - So, I'm I'm like mindful of that, and I think also like, as you know when you've made yourself vulnerable it can feel a bit icky afterwards.

F - Yeah

J - Like you must have that in your job-.

F - Yeah, yeah

J - When you see a patient outside of the hospital?

F - Yeah

J - There's like that complex thing of like, do I acknowledge that person, do I respect their privacy, like because you're creating these really intense bonds really quickly, umm and then the contexts change. You're not in the performative moment, your not in the hospital so. What you should have lead with was 'I'm a scouser, and a mental health nurse' and then one cancels the other out.

F - Oh does it, does it.

J - (Laughs) Of course it does.

F - Maybe I should have done that. But I think I just sat there in that audience that night.

J - Yeah

F - and for me, I was like, it was the first time I started thinking about, 'cause they've always been quite separate for me.

J - Yes

F - I've been in mental health, and then I've been a live artist, performance, angry protest and I've always kept them quite separate.

J - Yeah

F - But what I'm starting to realise, especially with this project, is they, they're interlinked, it, they can't not be.

J - Yeah

F - And everything, my other live art is about mental health. Well around it, my own mental health.

J - Yes, because also that's, I'm going to drop you in it here.

F - OK

J - That's why you became a mental health nurse isn't it?

F - It is! It is. To try and fix things that I couldn't fix at home.

J - Yeah

F - Yeah

J - Umm, and is that like, because is the act of like, umm, growing up in a challenging environment and being a caring person and that need, and I think it's a good need, to want to help other people because it helps yourself, right?

F - Yeah, for sure, yep.

J - and then there's the need to express that, which can be difficult in a more formal professional space, like being a nurse, like, it's different to being an artist isn't it.

F - Yeah, it is different, I mean, oh, I just, those questions throw me, but a little bit is like, I couldn't do the caring at home, it's a very different dynamic.

J - Well, that's because you were a child.

F - (laughs) cause I was a child, yeah.

J - (laughs) It's not your role.

F - Yeah, and yeah, I couldn't do it as a, as a child, and obviously part of being a mental health-

J - No no no, you *shouldn't* do it.

F - I shouldn't do it.

J - Because you were a child (laughs).

F - It's gonna, that's taken a long way 'til I get to...

J - Yeah but I just, I know but I have to correct that 'cause it's like I know there are young carers in this country.

F - Yeah

J - And we know why that's happening.

F - Yeah

J - Tories, and I, yeah, I'm not having a go.

F - No, no, no

J - But that language is important.

F - I know, and that language is important, but it takes, for young carers I think especially or, it takes a long t-, I mean it's taken me 'til I've just hit my forties 'til I can say that was wrong, my childhood.

J - Well, you only turned forty like two weeks ago Fox (laughs).

F - (Laughs) Exactly, it's taken me right 'til now.

J - (Laughs)

F - Uhh, I do, I know it's radio but I do not look my age. But anyway I'm just gonna move past that, but erm. Yeah a big, obviously like the mental health role for me and was to try and fix things I couldn't fix as I was a child, but the art for me was because I couldn't express those emotions.

J - Yeah

F - It's come out in the art.

J - Yeah

F - Yeah. My ang-, I did about 2 years of just doing black paintings and not acknowledging what those angry black paintings were about.

J - (Laughs)

F - So so as I come and I start to, I do you know I, I, I, go to therapy.

J - Mmm

F - I've worked a lot with a therapist that's kind of getting me to put these pieces together, but umm, yeah, but I think what, I think this project and what's inspired me to get involved in this project is me trying to fit them all together perhaps.

J - What, is this project? And I don't necessarily mean like because it maybe if someone is coming to this as a first time listener.

F - Yeah, yep.

J - You can go on the Heart of Glass website and read a bit about it.

F - Yeah

J - like, a *Madlove Takeover*, a festival for mental health in St Helens for the month of November, but also, what is it for you on a personal level?

F - On a personal level, um, so I think we met, we officially met I think you asked me at that conference.

J - Yeah

F - At the Heart of Glass conference, that you wanted to meet Patrick, you talked to Patrick Fox.

F - Said that he thought we should work together.

J - Yeah

F - Yeah. Um, and for me it was, it was, I'd done some work with Heart of Glass, it was about me coming back up North, 'cause I'm originally from Liverpool. It was me, for me it was working on a project that I could bring my skills and my art together.

J- Yeah

F - Yeah? I don't know what I'd imagined before I walked through the door, because what it, it changed as soon as I came in to the space for the first time. I could, I know you'd taken over the Argos.

J - Yeah

F - but I'd never imagine it, imagine it to be this big. I kind of know we had meetings about it and talked about it.

J - Yeah

F - And, I thought it would be ok, because I was a Lead Host and we did some training with the other hosts around mental health, how to have conversations.

J - Yeah

F - How to have difficult conversations, how to signpost, but what I wasn't ready for was the fact that because of the space and how it was and how you know the aesthetic of it, or something about it was that what not, everyone that came through the door knew somebody with mental health, had experienced it and was so open to being open. Because you know whenever I worked in mental health you're placed in a either in a ward, a clinical setting, people don't wanna open up for various reasons, umm, and, or I'm in the community, again they're very guarded but this space, just made people open up, like straight away, quite heavy stuff. Um, and-

J - You know what the tag line for that is?

F - What is it?

J - Which, which, Hannah Hall came up with. It's 'Putting the treat in treatment'

F - Yeah

J - Because you know, from mental health services, not because people that work in them are bad, but because of the resources available, those spaces are not nice, and, so what does that do to a person? Very quickly, it shuts you down, 'cause you feel like you've done something bad.

F - Yeah

J - So, flip it on its head right?

F - Like we care for each other, it's making that, it's a space where we know generally people are good people, no matter where they are in life, what stage they are, generally people wanna be with people and communicate and talk, and help each other, I've found. Am I being too, too Miss World with that no?

J - (Laughs)

F - Don't know?

J - No. Um, I think it's difficult to drill down into the specifics of that.

F - Ok.

J - I'm not, that's not a criticism.

F - No, no no.

J - I find that hard, like, if people say like, but like I've been in those situations where people are like, but really drill down into what is happening and how it works and I go 'I don't know if I can'.

F - Ok

J - And I think part of the problem with *Madlove* as a project is it's very difficult to be, like to meet a commissioner for the NHS. I would have to put it in a certain way in which they, y'know.

F - Yes

J - A quantifiable way in which they would understand and I can;t do that and I feel like I could say 'Come here, try it, and you will understand what I'm talking about' but what I'm talking about is it being welcoming, it being a little bit luxurious on a very small budget and it being non judgemental, and those are super, like, top level things, but it's just about an attitude isn't it? And that's the difference between art and like health care provision. Art, particularly performance and live art world is very much about an attitude.

F - Yeah.

J - Whether that's like a punk attitude or a DIY attitude or a squat attitude or a queer attitude or whatever, you know what I mean. Things have that like energy about them.

F - Well, yeah it's energy but it's also those, you are taking a risk yourself.

J - Mmm

F - So when I came in, for the first time I was in this space, coming from NHS Nurse. I was like so risk assessing the whole space.

J - (Laughs)

F - Like literally.

J - Anti-ligature one, anti-ligature two

F - I was like, this is such a ri-, like I've been so drilled in it.

J - Yeah

F - But when it's the art you'll take that risk, like as they say in the pro' 'positive risk taking' Um, But that's what, with live art and those, you take risks with your own emotions as well, your own kind of opening up.

F - Yeah, but that's, that's the nature of the NHS a bit at the moment. So I got out of that quickly, with my risk assessing the space. Working with you, because I was like 'oh there's trust, trust in the space' and it was fine.

J - Yeah but also trust people, because I think one of the most positive care, like mental health care experiences I ever had was umm, there's a place in Finsbury Park called The Maytree.

F - Ok

J - And it's a charity and it's called like a 'suicidal respite house' and you're only allowed to go once in your life, you only go for four nights and um, it's like four bedrooms and it's run by volunteers and they have therapists. And when you arrive, the amazing thing that they do is they hand your responsibility. They say, and they're taking in really actively suicidal people, and they say 'If you come here, you are responsible for yourself, there is a lock on the door, like, but you're coming here to work. You're getting your head down, you're getting the work done and something in you wants to survive so that's what we're going to focus on but if you're in a dangerous place if y'know those feelings,

thos big feels are really coming out, this is the procedure, this is where the alarm is and you reach out' lalalalala and so that experience and I had an experience there at four in the morning where I had to press the alarm and I was a bit scared. Versus my experience of going in to adult acute wards where, I arrive on the ward, I'm actively suicidal and a nurse force feeds me a yoghurt and then I'm sedated. That's not-

F- Yeah. No, it's not, it's not, it's not, uh yeah.

J - (Laughs) Y'know what I mean where I'm like. I'm in a dark place and I've got the big feels, but I'm not stupid, so

F - So, looking at what you've, like your inspiration and as being part of this project, would you say, after this has it changed you in any way or is it going to change your practice or-?

J - Well, interestingly I woke up yesterday morning, I don't know if people remember but the Tories they got this really big landslide in this election, I don't know, do people remember that at home? Do people remember how the feel after that?

F - Mmm, I'm still foggy.

J - Just to be clear for the listeners at home it's the day, It's Saturday and that happened on Friday morning (laughs).

F - Friday the 13th just FYI

J - Friday the 13th

F - 2019

J - Um, so I guess I woke up and y'know I wasn't surprised but I was in shock.

F - Mhmm

J - And I think experiences like that make me to, I need to really focus.

F - Yeah

J - And be really smart.

F - Yeah

J - With my organising and my activism and my art.

F - Yeah

J - And, I feel like this country is gonna get harder, more violent towards marginalised and poor people so actually I feel like this project has made me go, put your energy into the right places, with the right collaborators, with a smart use of the resources available, um, and yeah, so I think it's like, keep doing what you're good at, but that's hard to do when you're hustling as a freelancer.

F - Yeah

J - Because those gigs come along for me in Germany or whatever, and it's like, that's a good amount of money I can't really turn that down.

F - But I mean, the work that you're doing over there is about changing, I mean it's hard isn't it 'cause I think yesterday my initial reaction was to run, to run away, go somewhere different.

J - Yeah, Liverpool (Laughs)

F - Yeah, Liverpool (Laughs)

J - People's republic of Liverpool.

F - Somewhere really safe. I am quite privileged.

J - No that's a massive privilege.

F - That is a massive privilege that I can even think that, especially coming from y'know quite y'know, council estate, benefit, grew up on benefits and now I'm kind of in a position where I can think about that.

J - Yeah

F - But then I realise it is about refocusing.

J - Yeah

F - and being with your group, your people.

J - Yeah

F - And getting together and bein' together, and getting through these, what's gonna be a tough five, possibly five years.

J - Yeah, I think also, I'm, I'm quite impatient.

F - Ok, I've not noticed.

J - (Laughs) Haven't you, and like, so and I feel I've been doing *Madlove* for like five years and when it kind of formed as an idea, it was so clear in my head.

F - Yeah

J - That if you made spaces beautiful, if you made them welcoming, and if they were, people with lived experience were involved in the running of them, that it would be a lot better than what we had.

F - Yeah

J - And I still believe that, and you know what? I'm still right. (Laughs)

F - Yeah. You are right!

J - So, and like, it's taken five years to get to this point, like it's li-

F - But you've got to this point, is this it, is this your pinnacle point or is-?

J - No, nononono

F - Ok good

J - This is like, this is like, on the graph we're like a quarter of.

F - Ok, good, good, that's good.

J - But do you know what I mean like, I'm like, it's, it's, it's a lot of work and like, I think the problem is like, being able to demonstrate something does work.

F - Yeah

J - Is, is, is slow. But, you've just got to double down and get your head down and get the work done.

F - Yep

J - And, um-

F - Be with your people!

J - Be with your people, and look after yourself while you do it.

F - Yeah

END