

Curator of the Month: Hannah Firth

10 August 2017

★ Recommend (0)

💬 Comment (0)

From Beamish to the Biennale: curator Hannah Firth tells us about her journey, her inspirations and the collaborative spirit behind Cardiff's arts centre Chapter.



Hannah Firth with Wales in Venice artist James Richards
Photo: Jamie Woodley

Name and job title:

Hannah Firth, director of visual arts and deputy director at [Chapter](#), Cardiff, and curator for Wales in Venice 2017.

What inspired you to become a curator?

My parents regularly took me to museums and galleries when I was little and I especially remember visits to the [Ferens Art Gallery](#) in Hull and to the [Laing Art Gallery](#), Newcastle, where I spent many days exploring the collections and exhibitions. Years later, following in the footsteps of most of my family, I started a degree in social science in Bristol but was distracted by visits to the [Arnolfini](#) and other galleries that excited me more than any of the topics that I was studying at university. So I transferred courses and went to Newcastle to study history of modern art, design and film. This really opened my eyes to what contemporary art in all its forms might be and sparked my interest in developing a career in curating.

What was your first job in the museum world – and how did you get to where you are now?

While on my BA I did a work placement at Beamish open air museum in County Durham. I worked in the textile archive and was completely mesmerised by the immense collection of costume that had been donated or collected from around the region. I shadowed many of the specialist curators there and tried to absorb as much information as possible around exhibitions, acquisitions and collections.

When I graduated I started volunteering around my full-time restaurant job and was lucky enough to eventually land work at *a-n* magazine (then *Artists Newsletter*). Starting as information officer – providing practical advice to artists about everything from how to write a CV to documenting their work, and doing anything from providing the latest opportunities for commissions to turning a mangle into a printing press – I eventually worked my way up to managing editor, where I was responsible for overseeing the content and delivery of the magazine each month.

What has been the highlight of your career – and the biggest challenge?

It's difficult to pick one single thing but working on this year's Wales in Venice exhibition with the artist James Richards has to be right up there. It's a huge privilege to be selected to curate an exhibition at the Venice Biennale and even more so to work with an artist like James, who creates such visceral, urgent works of extraordinary depth and beauty.



James Richards and Steve Reinke, What weakens the flesh is the flesh itself (video still), 2017
© James Richards. Photo: Jamie Woodley

For Venice we produced a suite of new works including a six-channel audio piece that was created for a deconsecrated church and made in partnership with students from the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama, and a video that James made in collaboration with the Canadian artist Steve Reinke. Both works are immensely powerful and will stay with me for a very long time.

I inevitably have to refer to the increasing pressures on public institutions to deliver meaningful programmes of exhibitions, events and engagement within our dwindling budgets. This sector is becoming ever more stretched and so the challenge is in finding new ways to work. With this there is opportunity and that lies in collaboration, which is why we are currently working in partnerships with [ICA](#), London; [Bluecoat](#), Liverpool and [Collective](#) and [Talbot Rice](#) galleries in Edinburgh to deliver an expanded programme of exhibitions and events and to extend audiences to our respective programmes.

If you had one piece of advice for aspiring curators, what would it be?

Get out and see as much work as you can, meet as many artists and industry professionals as possible, read everything and above all be prepared to take risks.

What's special about working at your organisation?

Chapter is nearly 50 years old and is a really unique place to work. We have around 800,000 visitors each year and the building is alive from 8.30am until the bar closes, 361 days a year. Most mornings I might have five or six conversations with artists, curators and visitors before I've even set foot in my office, or I might meet up with a composer or a public art commissioner for lunch – there are so many based at Chapter either in our studios or using our cafe as a third space. It's a very genuine and generous creative hub. Often that is when the ideas flow.

What I also love about Chapter is that the emphasis is always on artists, whether that's to support them in the commission and development of new work, to allow them space and time for rehearsal or studio development, or to facilitate a wider critical dialogue around their practice. Artists are the beating heart of the venue.

What are your favourite objects in your collection and why?

Alongside the gallery programme I also work with colleagues Cathy Boyce and Catherine Angle to curate an annual live art festival called [Experimentica](#). It really is my favourite time of the year and brings together experimental live works from around the world. Last year we had more than 800 applications from our open call, and just selecting down to around 30 is incredibly intense but I consider it to be a real privilege to see international works that I might not otherwise come into contact with.

There have been some really incredible performances in its 16-year history. Stand-out shows include [GETINTHEBACKOFTHEVAN](#), Tim Bromage, Anti-Cool, Lorena Wolffer, Robin Deacon and Dog Kennel Hill Project. Alongside the larger shows, it's also a place for artists to show works in progress, or to reconfigure works and to do that in a safe and critically supportive environment.

Away from work, how do you spend your free time?

I travel as much as I can but inevitably that means that I go to see as many artists or exhibitions as I can while I'm there. Aside from that I love running and going to the cinema – fortunately Chapter has two fantastic screens with an enviable programme of independent and mainstream film.



James Richards, Migratory Motor Complex, 2017
© James Richards. Photo: Jamie Woodley

What is the best exhibition that you have been to recently?

The Larissa Sansour exhibition at the Bluecoat in Liverpool was excellent. Her exquisite new film *In The Future They Ate From The Finest Porcelain* resides somewhere between archaeology, science fiction and politics and explores the role of myth with a lyrical and captivating dialogue. [The exhibition can be seen at Chapter](#) from October through to January.

Aside from that I really enjoyed Nathaniel Mellors' and Erkkka Nissinen's *The Aalto Natives* and Rachel Maclean's *Spite Your Face* at the Venice Biennale. I'm delighted to say that, thanks to the support of Art Fund, Wales in Venice and Scotland + Venice are this year, for the very first time, [able to exchange exhibitions](#) between the respective nations back in the UK.