# Professor Alec Shepley, Acting Associate Dean Enterprise, Partnerships & Employability

## Artists engaging the public on environmental and societal issues and why it matters.

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**Professor Richard Day:** Good evening, everybody. A very warm welcome to those of you who are visitors to Wrexham University.

We like to hold these lectures around the campus and to move about, for the reason that there's been a lot of change here and it's not always evident from the outside so it's nice to have visitors here to be able to wander around the building and see the improvements that have been made.

So do feel free afterwards, we're going to gather again, if you want wine and more food and to chat and to have a look around at some of the changes have been made here.

So, a very warm welcome to you, especially on this evening, which is particularly cold and horrible. I'm not going to spend too much time introducing Alec. Alec is a professor of Arts and Society, he’s our Associate Dean for Research in one of the faculties and his interests are very varied, I think that's fair to say, and his research has gone across many continents and he's exhibited across the world. So, from Conwy down the road through to far flung parts, so he’s a well-travelled man.

I have to confess that I have heard Alec talk before, it was very engaging, very illuminating and so there's no pressure Alec, but no doubt this evening will be exactly the same, so I will pass you over.

**Professor Alec Shepley:** I was waiting for the ‘but’ there.

**Professor Richard Day:** No, there’s no but.

**Professor Alec Shepley**: I'm Alec and I'm grateful to you all for coming out on such a chilly night. It's tempting to stay by the fire on nights like this, I know. So, welcome to my public lecture.

I'm an Associate Dean for Research, I’m based in the Art School, Wrexham School of Art at Regent Street in Wrexham, obviously. When this public lecture series came out, it piqued my interest and I thought, why not stand up and say a few words about the kind of things that are going on in the arts from your perspective?

So that's a little bit of an intro. The title has changed somewhat from the advert, as you develop these lectures, sometimes your thoughts change and it's become more, as I've reflected on the talk, about people place and purpose. Very, very closely around the idea of publicly engaged art practice, particularly around health and wellbeing and the environment, the green transition, all of those challenges that we are facing and why it matters, really.

So, I'm going to give you an overview of an ongoing series of projects investigating ways in which artists and art researchers based in North Wales are engaging in a wider discourse around art, health, wellbeing and the green transition agenda. I call it artistic research. Lots of other people call it that too. It might be a new term to you. It's qualitative and it tends to kind of grow in an organic way. Some people refer to it as rhizomatic, like a rhizome it kind of grows in and out and crosses over disciplines, not just within the Art and Design sector, but into Social Science, into Science, Engineering. So, it kind of takes you on a path or it's taken me on the path and it's taken my colleagues on the path but it's Arts and Humanities, essentially.

As we have developed our research since 2016, it's become more apparent that people and place are quite key components of it and that's become known as place-based approaches, which include Art and Design, fieldwork, interviews, observations, literary sources, as well as artistic practice. What we're doing in the Art School is building up a set of examples, if you like, and evidence base. It's ongoing, we're producing research outputs as well as artefacts and developing our capacity in line with the university's ambition around research and income generation.

That is a younger version of me in Albert Square in Manchester around about 1988. So, I'm going to say a little bit about me because that's sort of the bit I know best really and a bit about the context in Wales. The Wellbeing of Future Generations Act 2015 is well known and well embedded now, recognises cultural capital as an important asset and aims for a society that promotes and protects culture. Connected communities is about creating the right conditions where people and communities can do the things that matter to them and that's where our projects fit around placemaking and communities. It's linked to the university's civic mission and This Future Generations Act.

Recently I heard that the Future Generations Act itself is based on an older tradition in ancient cultures, particularly Iroquois cultures in North America, where they didn't do anything without contemplating the effect eight generations hence, and I thought this was a new idea and I was surprised like most people, gosh, it's not a new idea, but what a fantastic idea. How did we lose track of that? So, the work is linked to the civic mission, as I said on this act. We are trying to embed it and use it as a framework for our work to engage with partners, to co-create, to develop leadership, if you like, through research so people leading in their field feel confident to go out into the world beyond academe and engage with people and start to try to think of whole systems, because a lot of the challenges that we are facing are quite sticky, I'll come onto that later, and kind of bigger than one person and certainly bigger than one discipline and one organisation and I'll talk a little bit about that, how the work hopes to sort of address that.

I'll talk a little bit about me, my art practice at the intersection of art, people and place and I'll talk a bit about the plus agenda, which is a strategy coming out of the School of Arts. I’ll say a little bit about climate change in Wales and how this thing called the Future Wales Fellowship, funded by the Arts Council of Wales, is addressing that and a bit about two projects, one called Ecological Citizens and one called the Public Map Platform. I've also got a little bit to say about Tŷ Pawb, which is the contemporary art gallery and unless I get a move on, there won't be enough time for Q&A because I've got 40 slides, I timed myself time one minute a slide, I'm already overdue but I can race on.

So, a bit about myself. That's from the same project. It was, inviting people on Albert Square as part of a festival in Manchester to draw what they saw through a rectangle. So, I had a piece of polythene stretched over a wooden frame and people just came and drew and then as they drew, they realised that their perspective changed as they moved their heads, so it created these kinds of crazy drawings. People just came along and had a go and that was it for the two days I was there, young and old alike. I had a studio, but my preference was for getting out and about, mobile, and that's been my practice ever since and my work really builds on this idea of art's purpose and its purposelessness is its purpose, if you like. It's unburdened by having to be anything other than what it is. I have read quite a bit about the ideas around ‘being’, as much as ‘art’, so I read quite broadly and I've got a slide just to kind of reflect on that a bit later on. But the work in a sense; somebody once said to me that Ed Allington, who passed away recently, who incidentally, coincidentally actually, we have one of his drawings on the wall in one of the foyers just through there. He said, “art isn't contained by an art object, it's embodied or imbued”, so when you're looking for art in an object, your kind of barking up the wrong tree. Art is a moment or a quality or a sensation. It just happens to come to you via objects or sounds or stimuli, but I think what he was trying to do was to try and kind of reverse a trend at the time around fetishising art objects. At the same time, I was also reading about frames around artworks are often breached by artists. You who give artists a set of rules and they'll immediately start breaking them, because he was saying that that is the way art comes about, through boundary breaking and pushing beyond what the rules and the norms are. So, my practice really has been about trying to push those rules, if you like, often into kind of ad hoc situations where I actually don't know what's going to happen. And that's part of the excitement, it's also, it can be, there are easier ways of doing it, put it that way. So, it's the only way really to try to get over this idea that art is ‘more than’ this singular object. As I say, there is time for Q&A at the end, if I've not explained myself particularly well and you can ask, but it's about new directions.

A lot of it has to do with being speculative and a lot of it has to do with it not actually ever finishing. What I found myself doing is many years later, still, working out on the street. This is a project called Pilot Hole in 2019, and it was a fire brick or ventilation brick that I walk past every day from Regent Street to the coffee shop and it was just about eye level and it was a broken vent in a wall. So, I decided, to cut a long story short, I decided to curate it and we did lots of projects, so we called it The Hole in the Wall Gallery. I discovered there was a Hole in the Wall Gallery in Manitoba, in Canada, and then I found loads. People unknown to each other, doing these strange impromptu public art happenings, occupying small void spaces in urban landscapes. Done in partnership with, these were students and some staff and a visiting artist and Tŷ Pawb kindly supported me through their offsite program and it ran for a week. The there was a fast turnover of two artists per 24 hours and we filmed it and people stopped and chatted and we documented that and that was all part of it. So, it became more like an event.

This is another project that I did sort of 2013, 2014. I got a residency at a place called X Church in Gainsborough, in Lincoln, one of the most deprived boroughs in Lincolnshire and indeed England. I was invited in by this gentleman here who was the person behind it, Malcolm. He had seen what I've been doing and said I’d like you just to come in and just ‘be’ and ‘react’ and work with whoever's coming in. They had musicians, they had youth theatre, they had youth clubs, play groups, a community garden that were building a kitchen in this de-consecrated church and I went in there and I played around with the young people in there. One was a workshop to do with, I can't remember what it was to do with, obviously post-its and instead of sticking them on the shed that I had, they decided to stick them on me and I said fair enough and we had fun. We played and we still engaged in a process which resulted in an outcome, not necessarily with defined edges, so it was happy times for me. Alongside it, I had this shed on wheels and also, I built a skip using doors donated by a company just up the road who had a vast surplus of doors and I saw them when I was driving there one day and I just drove into the car park and I kind of do that quite a lot, I just ask and you know the worst that they could say is no, they didn't. They said yeah, and they actually delivered them as well, and they also brought some fixings to help me fix them and donated some timber as well.

So, it was to do with participation, with a hunch, if you like about what I was trying to do and there’s a nice quote here from a chap called François Matarasso, who's written this fantastic book called A Restless Art, and it's to do with participatory practice:

“*I don't regard the people involved in a participatory art project as volunteers. I think they're artists. I was always unsure about the renaming of amateur arts as voluntary arts in the 1990s, and I think now that is because it conflates two ideas that I've always seen as separate. Giving your time and not being paid are different*.”

I wanted to put myself in a situation where I actually only had a few sort of pointers, if you like, about what I was going to do. But I've also done other projects with colleagues in the room. Ali Roscoe being one of them on the Llangollen Fringe Festival. This was a project that we did called Tea Lights where we got people to donate cups and saucers. Llangollen is a great place for tea houses and people come and go for tea and coffee, also a great place for cyclists. So, we made these lanterns using old, reclaimed bicycle wheels, wired in lights and then on the streets we just invited passers-by to come and decorate them whichever way they wanted to, and made these kinds of lanterns hung outside the town hall and job done. That was part of the visual arts program for the Fringe Festival.

And as Richard says, I've also done things in other places. This was a ruined house that I made in Winnipeg, made of wood and neon, and it was a replica of the studio that I was in. There's a story behind it to do with ruin and abandonment, but also trying to create a space where people, when they went in that space, they were actually having to walk through the work. The neon glowed; they were part of it. The health and safety people didn't like me very much because there were lots of wires and neon is several thousands of volts but I sought forgiveness rather than permission.

And then this final one on me, just again a project because of the work that I had done, I started to find other avenues besides galleries that invited this kind of work. I managed to get accepted in this project called Insert 2014 in New Delhi and part of the project I, I went over there and swept lines in the architecture. In New Delhi, where I was in Connaught place, was designed by Lutyens based on Bath, the crescent in Bath and it's very, very different to how he envisaged it now. Its's noisy, it's messy, it's dirty, hustle and bustle and I just wanted to kind of plant myself in there and start to try to trace some of the lines that were still there using a sweeping brush. Okay, and I got funded for it and I was even more surprised about that because I was basically taking a line for a walk, literally, and then I wrote this up into a paper after. But it was good to be involved with people like Rooks Media Collective who do this kind of stuff all the time.

Then finally, closer to home, this was a project that I did with a colleague called Paul Jones where we towed two canoes up a hill, filmed it and then sat in them on top of this hill and the project became known as ‘Are we there yet?’ and it was exhibited at a gallery in Caernarfon. Again, it's about something that looks purposeful, but you're not quite sure what its purpose is.

An example of some of the reading, you know, so that's one of the earlier books I started to read about the place of art in society: The Social Production of Art by Janet Wolff, was one of those ones that I read in the nineties. Then there's that book by Matarasso that I just finished reading a few months ago, but I've started now to read books about rainforests and ‘looking’ and ‘noticing’ as much as art books, because I've found that that's become more important to me. Ways of Being was one of the first ones that I started to read over summer, and then somebody bought me this book, somebody recommended that book because I started to think more broadly about the planet and more broadly about the direction of travel. I think also, the people that I'm working with prompted me to think in that way and less in my own echo chamber, so I just wanted to give a flavour of that. But early doors I was reading Grey and Malins just to get me going about what practice as research actually can be, a generative instrument. This is one of the books that I still recommend to research students by Grey and Malins, it uses the landscape as the metaphor for the researcher and the book is titled Visualising Research. I didn't need to read any more, as soon as I read the title, I thought ‘that's for me’ and I’ve read it a few times now and it's a really good guide for anybody thinking about doing a PhD, how to kind of develop some kind of imagination or some kind of imagining, if you like, of what your research might be using that landscape metaphor. But what they're saying is that this idea of reflective practice is key, so making the work is one thing but then reflecting on it and then having a reflective conversation with your work and how that kind of becomes a generative model for next steps.

That kind of thinking was one of the themes, if you like, that I picked up when I started here in 2016 with a colleague called Sue Liggett, who had just really trail blazed, if you like, this Arts and Health idea. She was supervising a student called Meghan Wyatt, who went on to complete a PhD titled Painting and Dementia: A Mixed Method Investigation into Creative Dialogue between Artists and People Living with Dementia. What she found was, the people engaged in the actual practice of painting with the medium of paint, it sounds a bit mechanical and a bit basic, has a positive effect on their experience, their well-being and their outcomes. Now we all hear about the benefits of Arts and Health, poetry, painting, we hear about walking is good for your health, we hear about wild swimming is good for your health. What we're trying to do is create a situation or create a model where an artist researcher can work within those areas to try to find out why, and evidence it. Not to prove whether it's right or wrong, but to try to build up some kind of experiential qualitative research base which evidences perhaps how and why that works.

That gave me an idea about me trying to get out of my own art echo chamber, art doesn't reside in a vacuum, so we had this idea of Art plus…Health, Art plus pedagogy, Art plus sweeping…plus whatever you want. Rather than it becoming a kind of ‘Wayne's World’ effect, we decided as we moved along that it should really be about the idea of sustainability and resilience and those kinds of things. So that's our strategic partnering initiative, if you like, and we've got a set of aims there which demonstrate what it's all about. Meghan Wyatt's PhD was finished, I can't remember the date when it was finished, but it was finished before this started, but it led us to develop this idea. The first one that we started with was with Mostyn in Llandudno, and I'll come onto that.

I just want to talk a bit about, now, those PhDs that are part of the Arts plus strategy. Some of them are in the early parts of their development, some are in the middle and some have completed. So, the first one, I've done them in alphabetical order, is Ali Roscoe. This slide shows students throwing clay balls up a sloped corridor in Regent Street and what she's trying to do here is play. What we're finding is a lot of the students that come to us have somehow become limited in their confidence to play and take risks or get their hands dirty even. So, some of the work that we do in the early year, the first year in the first semester, is about getting your hands dirty, doing crazy things and feeling good about it, and then learning from it, learning through play. It's funny now that people are starting to produce books called Ludicology and I'm coming across groups like Play Disrupt, and Tŷ Pawb are also very much involved in the idea of play. One of those books I referred to back there, From What Is to What If, to try to retrace our steps about when did we stop playing? When did we think that playing was a bad thing? When did that happen and how do we sort of move ourselves on? So, what she's done is develop an investigation into the relationship between material and how manipulating and playing with material is absolutely key to material thinking, tactile engagement, and the creative process in fine art practice. With a group of students in the art school that she teaches, she's developing and enabling pathways in which creativity and knowledge from direct experience can be utilised in their journey and documenting that as part of the research process. That involves workshops, I’d like to call them playgroups, but maybe she might not like that, but some of the work is influenced by this project that happened in 1969 to 1973 at one of the art schools in London called the Locked Room, where students were treated in certain ways to force them to think in a different way. It was quite severe, the locked room, we are not doing that. We're not locking people in rooms, but we are looking at that pedagogic approach or model, if you like, to try to understand how we might develop a pedagogic system which is more enabling and there's a colleague called Paul Jones, who's also working on Arts plus pedagogy. Interestingly, this project had, like all of them, to do with COVID and material engagement was number one during COVID, so how that manifested itself through online learning is very interesting and forms quite a significant part of the study because that has not gone away. That threat is still there, but also online learning is still there.

The second one is Anthony Jackson. He did a project, and his viva is in a couple of weeks, investigating and informing an emergent model of practice for artists working in Arts and Health. So, he had several objectives and one of them was to try to understand and document the benefits of artists working in health care settings and his title that he ended up with was ‘Curating Immersion’ An Exploration of Participatory Art Practice in Health Care Contexts. He's developed a model and a toolkit, and I think that he and Sue had already developed a tool kit prior to this, which might have been a trigger for the full-on PhD. But what we were trying to do is to inform those people in the NHS who are commissioning artists, to enable them to understand what artists actually do because we found that some of it was based on maybe a partial understanding of what artists do. The model tries to kind of help inform both sides so both parties, if you like, know about the other so you don't end up making mistakes. One of the benefits of this is that it produces a solid foundation on which to create a dedicated training course and one colleague who was meant to be here tonight can't be because she's actually delivering our new Arts in Health course, which is an evening course, so that's a plug for you.

The next is Cerys Alonso, who's a jeweller initially, but like many artists, she has crossed the boundaries into other areas using other materials. She was one of the first people I came across who was using found objects and scrap material, as well as precious metals and precious gemstones alongside stuff and things that people thrown away. Now she's developing a study, a PhD, into whether material exposure in childhood influences material choices and adult craftsperson, but she's also experimenting with large scale car building processes and how they could be utilised by a jeweller or a metal smith or a silversmith and that's what these images show, where she's obviously working on some fairly kind of chunky metal bending processes and trying to bring that back to a jewellery making context.

This was the first PhD that we did as part of the Arts plus strategy. Claire Harding, who has now finished her PhD in creating tools for a post digital public. Now, how this happened, there was a conversation brokered by one of the governors here between myself and the director, Alfredo Carmerotti at Mostyn. I went over there for a cup of coffee, it was just an intro because I was new in my job 2016 and I was getting around to different people, we hit it off. He told me about a problem that they had to do with the digital, how artists are making work which does not conform to your gold frame or your plinth and how does a Victorian gallery space in Llandudno deal with that? How do we develop new audiences along with the new artists? How do we hang on to the audience that we've already got? I said, well that sounds like a research project, if ever I saw one, how would you like to co-fund a PhD studentship? He said yes. Long story short, that's how we did it. So, a lot of these projects are actually co-funded with another partner. We picked partners of strategic importance, Mostyn is one, Tŷ Pawb is another, but just before I finish on Claire, she's now actually acting director at Mostyn. I mean, that's quite a story, but this is the model that she developed about how to manage your curating program and your commissioning programme and your education programme for the digital realm. She also worked with academics from UCLAN, University of Central Lancashire on this project, and they developed what's called an edge platform, which looks like something off Doctor Who when you go there, it's got lots of knobs and dials on it and it's a way in for people to access the digital realm for their experience in the gallery. So, the idea was that this model could be then replicated by other galleries, not just for Mostyn, because galleries up and down the land are trying to deal with this kind of issue.

The next is Emma Preece, who's investigating how sustainability and playfulness, joy and community engagement contribute to wellbeing and quality of life. She's conducting this as part of the Public Arts Programme at Theatre Clwyd, which is another one of our partners. Theatre Clwyd is undergoing a once in a lifetime £45 million renovation and redevelopment. Emma is immersed in that world at Theatre Clwyd, doing her projects with those people who are not all in Theatre Clwyd, which is where it was meant to be based, because the builders are in there. So, she's having to work around different offices and buildings and places and events. She's using that kind of Public Arts Program to develop a practice-based inquiry, contextually underpinned through research into the themes of sustainability and playfulness, but play, if you'll pardon the pun, was underplayed at the beginning of the project, but now has become quite a big feature. This was a point at the in the building works where she was actually allowed in with some young people to play around in the building and do various enactments, shall we say, in the shadows and just have the building for themselves. So, they were running around the building at night doing it, having all kinds of fun. So, she's really taken on board this idea of the arts being recognised as having the potential to support things like health and well-being, and being part of that commissioning process for Healthcare, Social Services, you know, people think it's part of it is a frontline service, the arts are part of that frontline service.

The next one is Tracy Simpson. Who is again, finished, she's just doing a few amendments to her thesis and she's now employed as a researcher on one of my projects, but this was a PhD that she did to do with the collaboration and communities’ resilience. She wanted to investigate the role of visual arts in the creation of social space and how artists, arts organisations and communities collaborate with each other, or not. So, she was part of some of the projects as a freelance arts commissioner, but also as a researcher and she is an artist as well in her own right, so she was enabled, if you like, to understand the context straight away, if you like. She produced a thesis which introduced the notion that the contested or collaborative space formed at the centre of these relationships is the artwork. If you remember back to what I was saying earlier on about it comes at you from a surprising angle sometimes, the actual artwork. So, the contested or collaborative space became the work, not what people thought it was going to be and she was involved with all kinds of interesting groups. This project on the top is Corwen, and it's Drewyn the giant, by structure and agency and it was to create something that was visible from the air, like an earthwork, but also you could experience at ground level as well. She examined the tensions inherent in that collaborative relationship between the commissioner, the artists and the public, because public arts really should involve the public and there are examples of public art in Corwen that did not involve the public and you can see the difference quite starkly when you go there.

Now we're onto the next bit, which is we've left Arts Plus behind, we’re now on to the Future Wales Fellowships. On the right-hand side, you've got the first inaugural cohort, if you like, of artists and when I saw this, I was kind of in awe, actually, that the Arts Council of Wales would have the gumption and the confidence actually, to put so much money behind this idea of inviting artists to spend 16 months undertaking creative research on the theme of a connection to nature. I thought it was wonderful. They had lots of online sessions where people could find out about it, so there was a really good process where you could seek questions and research it before you applied and it was an opportunity for artists to be put in that place where they could challenge understanding of our relationship to nature and how to reconnect with it and to explore our own relationship to nature. And remember, Wales is very, very strongly driven now by that Future Generations Act and this was a great example of putting the funding in place. The artists got a grant of £25,000 each, there were eight artists selected and they were given pretty much, within the realms of the rules of the game, free rein to develop their work and I managed to catch up with two or three of them and interview them and talk to them about their work, so we're going to look at them in a little bit of detail because I'm aware that we've got a time limit.

The fellows were invited to look through the lens of lived experience and the research could be global or hyperlocal, and it created space for reflection. So, we thought, me and my colleagues thought, this was going to be a one off but this year they've just done the same, they've just announced eight further artists for the next phase of development. This first one was Angela Davis. This is a video still from a piece of work that she did for the project called Aequus and incidentally, this group are showing their work at the Glynn Vivian Gallery in Swansea, I've not been there myself yet, but I am minded to go down and see it and it's on till February or something. But she described how the fellowship had given her the opportunity to expand the physical scale of her work, including the development of new processes, conversations through scientific interdisciplinary collaboration and opportunities for deeper engagement with her local community. So, the project itself enabled her to continue the work that she wanted to do but was unable to do because of funding and the artists in the room will know what I mean by, that is frustrating sometimes, so this gave her an opportunity to develop in the way that she wanted to. She used the opportunity to challenge her own way of thinking about climate change and she's also part of this group called Studio Made, which is based in Denbigh, and that's founded by herself, and an artist called Mark Eaglen and it's a creative laboratory. They were able to use that, it's an old coach house in Denbigh to develop work across the disciplines of Arts, Science, Technology and Nature and obviously, coming from the Faculty of Arts, Science and Technology, I just needed to go and talk to her. So, I started to interview her and I started to write up a paper about the kind of work that she's doing alongside Kirsti Davies, who also spared me a few moments to talk to me about her work. She's a multidisciplinary community artist working to bring people together through creativity and play but with plants, and her focus is to connect environmental issues with people through encouraging curiosity and hands on participation via art practice. She was using the art practice as a kind of mechanism or device and she's locked on to the idea of the seaweed in Wales, basically. She's done a website called Gwymona and that was part of her Future Wales fellowship, designed to better understand how art and culture can play a role in engaging people in key issues such as climate change and nature emergencies. In her project, she's trialling 101 uses of seaweed with individuals and organisations and business, and there's a person in the audience I was speaking to earlier on, who had the same idea about 101 uses for, I think it was sticks. I say, do it. Seaweed, who would've thought it? But the more I've looked into it, as soon as I finished talking to her, it’s been there for aeons that we've used it for all kinds of things. I remember my dad telling me it was in Angel Delight, I don't know if I believed him or not, but I think he might have been right, something to do with the gel. She's also organised, as part of the fellowship, events, participatory activities as part of the art practice like talks, like community group workshops, walks, and she also got into food. Food's a great way of bringing people together. I don't know how she did it, but she got local restaurants to engage in her project. These are restaurants that are commercial enterprises, right. They agreed with her and they changed their menus to include seaweed-based choices for a period of time. I thought she made it sound really easy, but as I was thinking about the conversation after I thought, actually if I tried that in my local restaurant, they might say ‘yeah, yeah, of course we will’, but she managed to do it and that became part of the work. The artwork, if you like, was multifaceted. Hard to sort of pin down, if you like.

Fern Thomas. She was the third one that I spoke to. She's involved in social sculpture, so work that actually requires human interaction. It could be a chair, a bench, it could be something that you have to pick up, but she also made these divinationary tools, like water diviners and she uses those to tell the future. She also has an element of her project, which is to do with the future uses of seaweed and an aspect of her research is exploring the processes around working with climate anxiety and also climate grief, particularly with children and young people who have presented real concerns and real worries about their future because of the bombardment that they get every day about the problem that we face and it's having an effect. Duh, you know, so trying to work with those people to develop a way of bringing out their narrative about what they would like and our Children's University here has done some work at Theatre Clywd, where children and young people have stood on stage at Theatre Clywd, I mean I'm talking young people, and delivered their manifesto for the future through this engagement process.

I put this slide in here just to sort of articulate how I think I started to think about how art actually works. It’s a painting by Diego Velasquez, painted in 1656, a very long time ago and it's called Las Meninas, which means the maids of honour. These people here and yet the subject of this painting seems actually to be this person here, the Infanta, the daughter of King Philip of Spain. But then you start to think, actually, well, if it's called Las Meninas, why is the main figure, why is it not called the Infanta? And in fact, actually, who's this and what's that? Oh, it's the back of a canvas and that must be Diego Velasquez, so it's a self-portrait. So, which one is it? Then, you notice at the back there's all these pictures at the back wall, but one of them is glowing and you look closely at it and if you know Velasquez’s work, you'll notice that that is actually a portrait of King Philip of Spain and the Queen. So, it must be a mirror, so the subject actually must be whoever is out here sat being painted on that picture. So actually, it's not the maids of honour, it's not the Infanta, It's not Diego, it's actually, but actually they're not here, where, ah they're where we are. Ah, I get it. So, the subject of this picture is actually me looking at you, looking back at me and when I went to see this picture, it's probably a bit bigger than that, in the Prado. You know, I've always loved the picture, I’ve never really understood it until I read this paper about it, which explained to me that this the purpose of this, is the purpose of art. It's to make you realise yourself, your own being, if you like. I’ve rushed that quite quickly actually, but just to explain it, there's been lots of analysis about what the true angles are and the true subject. You know, some people have gone out of their way, the scientists have gone out of their way to try to calculate the angles of ‘are they there or there’. This just actually adds to the intrigue, it actually creates another object, if you like.

Which brings me to this model, what I was talking about earlier on, if that didn't make much sense, hopefully this will; is the artwork somehow resides between audience, context, artists or people, the place and the artist, if you like. That's the purpose, it reminds you that you are a human being, looking at something regarding something and getting something back from it. There's a relationship, it's relational, it's not all about ‘the thing’ and art, therefore, can offer a chance for people, society we’ll call them, to collectively reflect on that imaginary figure. It's self-understanding. Another interesting idea is that art actually only exists in its place of making. Once it's been moved, it's been wrenched and it's changed, its context has changed, its picked up some other things along the way, some added value, some added meaning. Daniel Buren, the French artist, said in 1969, when I read this paper by him in Studio International, he said that “art is its most honest place in its place of making”, which made me understand why he makes the work he does, it’s in situ. Although he has, like I have, worked in galleries, but you can't wait to get out of them. So, moving swiftly on, Arts and Humanities methods are in demand because of that relational ability, the ability to work rise rhizomatically across different disciplines and in and out of perceived barriers, and especially the place-based approaches because they kind of facilitate, as an artist going in somewhere, that bottom-up research rooted in reality. They're often multidisciplinary, co-creative and they help us understand and address those real complex challenges.

So that's going to talk a little bit about Tŷ Pawb. Tŷ Pawb is the contemporary art space in Wrexham. It was a marketplace with a car park until an architect came along, used the funding that was on offer and turned it into this wonderfully vibrant mix of marketplace, food court, contemporary art space, and people just passing through. So, it's like a kind of colander, people just pass through and mix with what's going on there. Recently, they've done a project where, Tracy was involved in this I mentioned earlier, but they developed the roof terrace, which was a car park, into a roof garden, Maes Parcio Creadigol, hope I’ve said that right. Marja Bonada was the artist involved in this project and through working with partners Tŷ Pawb, Kim Inspire, Ado, Marja Bonada through 2023 developed this fantastic roof garden. Not by herself, but by involving communities and gallery goers and people who are not necessarily interested in art, but they were interested in growing. Because what Tŷ Pawb are about is this idea of useful art and it comes from this Arte Útil. So, this is relatively new, if you like, but it's the direction of travel that Tŷ Pawb has decided to take and they've gone so far as to create their second gallery as an Arte Útil space. So, they've got two galleries. One is the main gallery, the other one is this useful art space where people go in and play or whatever and do and make and create, take risks. So, they've actually taken all of these ideas and dedicated a resource around it, and they've got some fantastic furniture designed to enable the happening, so these are diagrams from the designer who made the specific furniture, if you like, or arrangements to enable that. They use that space to propose new uses for art within society, to use artistic thinking, to challenge the field within which it operates. You know, challenging ourselves, you know, what's our purpose? You know, and I think our university is also doing that. We all know we're good at stuff, but who for? So that's where the civic mission comes in. We're trying our best to demonstrate what we do has direct application, pretty much straight away without needing too much explanation, our purpose, if you like and a lot of it is around pursuing sustainability and helping people.

And I couldn't help notice, when I got this photograph here, I couldn't help noticing, I thought, hang on a minute, that that looks very much like this. I thought, I'll just throw that one in to probably to, you know, you see something, you think, oh yeah, visually, that makes sense. So, it must make sense.

We're just rounding up now, finding through our research, through working with our PhD students, working as a group of artists in Wrexham School of Art and academics, we're very lucky. We are finding an emergent pattern coming from the things that we're looking at and I think that's really, really useful to note, you know, a bit like I always think of Darwin on HMS Beagle, going out into the world, going whoa, what's that? And then finding something else. And actually, that looked a bit like that, and a pattern starts to emerge from the things that you discover, then you can start to make sense of it through reflective analysis and that's how it becomes a thing that might be discernible to others. For our purposes in universities, a research paper, which demonstrates something of interest. So, we're finding an emergent pattern around sticky problems, things that don't go away. They’re kind of bigger. I read a book recently where they refer to them as hyper objects. You know, you've got an object. Okay. It's a glass of water, COVID, if that’s an object, that's got to be a hyper object. It's bigger than you can imagine, you know, or the Internet is a hyper object. I tend to call them sticky problems because that sounds more me. We're discovering that people are very interested, this might sound really obvious, but I'm going to say it anyway, what matters most when you get down to it and you're working with communities, you're working with people, or even a gallery director, having a coffee. What matters most to you? Actually, the digital is what matters most to me and I need to a need to know that I'm doing something about it, otherwise, I'm not the director. Belief in the future, although there's a lot of pessimism. People place a purpose. Artists working as catalyses working beyond material and conceptual borders, so reaching out to others, other publics, people, other discipline's, interdisciplinary, hybridising, who knows, we might even create a new discipline or an anti-discipline. Participatory practice. Extending languages, some of it is funded, I'll come onto it in a minute before I round up completely. Some of it is not funded and it's precarious, but it's necessary. So, that's what we're doing.

We have some more PhDs in the pipeline with Tŷ Pawb, ones to do with multicultural communities, ones to do with creative youth voices and we're also advertising for a Senior Research Fellow in Arts and Engagement, because we need a post actually that brings those two things together.

It adds up to something else. Through doing this work as part of our normal day to day practice, we've been asked to join in other bigger research projects which are funded. This one, the first one was called is called Ecological Citizens, three and a half million or thereabouts. Royal College are the leaders, along with the Stockholm Environment Institute in York University and us. That came about through doing what Richard often tells me to do, which is to get out and about and network with people and you never know what you might turn up. So, through a networking event I was banging on about me probably, making work out of stuff that I find in skips because I find that fulfilling that I've done something with something that people are throwing away, and I've always done that. Anyway, a year or so later, the professor from the Royal College wrote to me and said ‘hey, we're doing this ecological citizens, that sounds like you, do you want to join?’, I didn't even hesitate.

So, it's a network plus project to develop a model, or models, for a sustainable digital society by looking at ways of empowering citizens, rather than waiting for institutions to do it, to help people take care of their environment. But I think what we're trying to do, certainly from the Wrexham end, there are three different groups, at the moment we are mapping what's going on already because we do not want to be seen as people coming along saying we know just what you need, because they've heard it all before. What we're doing is mapping practices that we come across that people are already doing, like young people writing a manifesto for a greener future and then building up a network of our own. The most recent, I'll come on that in a minute, the most recent one we did just before Christmas. So, we have a definition and a lot of it is to do with bringing people together and doing things. The leader Rob Phillips, he's the design tutor at Royal College. He was the man behind nature watch, or rather, My Nature Watch, where a few years ago with Chris Packham, he devised a package that young people could just buy very, very cheaply and make their own trail camera for a few quid. So, they weren't just buying a trail camera and then sticking it on a tree, they were having to think and make and do and put this thing together, they were connected up and what happened was that they created a national network of children and young people's trail cameras looking at nature in their gardens. I haven't got a slide for it, but an unintended consequence of this was that people's gardens started to change. They documented, they noticed in the background gardens changing over time, the slabs had gone, the cobbles had been dug up or that concrete standing had been dug up and they'd started to rewild their gardens to attract more beasties into their gardens so they could get better. There was a kind of competitive spirit amongst the children and young people to attract more nature into their gardens and then getting their parents to rip up their gardens to create more natural reserves. I thought, well, you couldn't have planned for that.

Our networking event that we had in December was really fantastic and I’m not just saying that because it was actually Daniel Knox, who's a designer in the Engineering school here, who brought together people into an online space using this software called Miro, which was new to me, and develop this post-it exercise where people were asked the question, ‘how might we?’ and that was the key. We had breakout groups defined by themes to do with accessibility, sustainability, inequalities and community. Quite challenging, quite broad, if you like, and what happened was they came together and started to bring back their own feedback from their own experiences. We had people from Brymbo Heritage Trust, Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board, Natural Resources Wales, Flintshire Council, Wrexham Council, you know, we had quite a broad group brought together. That's now being developed into a paper where we're developing a taxonomy of sources, if you like, of what people are already doing and already thinking about ecological citizenship, because we don't want to reinvent the wheel or tell people what to do. We want to find out what they're doing, in their place.

Another element of the project is food, you know, so it could be, you know, materials could be nature. Food is one of the biggies and this was part of the project where we noticed lots of community larders or pantries, not food banks but community larders and community pantries, which this one happened during COVID and also as a way of dealing with waste. So, volunteers pick up excess food that's left over at supermarkets by an agreement. Collect it and then bring it to the community centre or the village hall and then on certain day people can go and take it away and the idea is to stop it all going into landfill. Interestingly, what happens with the food that's left over from the food pantry? Because there is often food leftover. Someone started to keep pigs in the valley as a result of all this excess food, so it goes to them and then other the stuff goes to the farm dogs or the chickens, so nothing is wasted. So, what we're trying to do is avoid waste, avoid landfill, but it also had this added effect of creating quite a community spirit that wasn't there before. Now, John Swogger is quite a well-known illustrator, again, I just asked him, would you like to try to do a drawing which brings all of that together into one picture? He said ‘yeah, okay, I'll have a go’ and that's what he's come up with. So, you can’t really see it on this slide, but it follows a narrative: origins, organisation, the pantry versus a bank was a thing that they discussed, the weekly event, local suppliers, pigs, chickens and compost, sharing results. And now what I found is the more I've looked, the more I found of these around the borough, so I started to map them on my wall in my office. Wrexham County and Flintshire County have got a list, but we've got ones that they don't know about and they've got ones that we didn't know about and we're starting to build a picture of this ecological citizenry, hopefully it might lead to more growing. Hopefully it might also lead to less waste, as an example of how to take an idea and run with it.

The next one that we were invited to join because of our work, is this Public Map Platform, which was Cambridge are the lead, Cardiff and us. It came from a councillor on the Isle of Anglesey, worried about the effect of climate change anxiety on children and young people, met this professor from Cambridge at a networking event, collared her and said, ‘I've got this idea, you're an academic, you must be good at getting money’ and low and behold, she was right. So, now we're doing this green transition ecosystem grant with Cardiff, Cambridge and Wrexham, to do a mapping project on the island of Anglesey. It’s started now or in a few weeks’ time and the idea is to develop a digital map which reveals data layers. Some of it will be quantitative data to do with climate and environment, but some of it will be qualitative to do with society and culture, which is where Wrexham School of Art came in because of the work we've been doing. So, we are now developing something called bardic mapping. We’re working on Anglesey, we've appointed three bards, based on the Arts Council of Wales creative practitioner model, so they artists but they are quite broad in their practices from poetry, painting, music, singing, dancing. They will go around the island of Anglesey working with children and young people to bring out of them their stories, their narrative, to create a visual map like a Google map, hope maybe with films, maybe with artworks, maybe with maps, maybe with poems, maybe with whatever the children and young people decide they want to do, or manifestos. Those will be able to be plotted on a map, so the map will have three layers like a sandwich, an environmental, a social and a cultural layer and that's what we're doing for the next, well we said 18 months. But in addition to that, we will be, through Invisible Studio down there, a chap called Pierce Taylor, who's an architect. As part of the project, he's been commissioned to build a rural roaming room and you can just about make out there, some kind of structure. A wacky, stripy, tent-y, thingy on wheels pulled by a tractor with a big balloon. Through working with a Ucheldre Art Centre in Holyhead, we will be workshopping with children and young people over the next few weeks to develop maquettes and models to be built into an actual rural roaming room, which will roam the island for as long as it lasts as a vehicle for, pardon the pun, gathering more stories. Or it might even be a mobile event, so we're planning on taking it to the Anglesey show, for example, so there’ll be lots of this agricultural machinery on wheels and then our artistic, rural roaming room. So, if you know anybody who lives in Anglesey who might be interested in a workshop on 13th and 14th of February, the half term break, to help him create this wonderful thing. We don't know what it will look like, but it's meant to involve children and young people and I keep mentioning them because part of the act requires that children and young people are part of the process from the get-go, not add-on’s, what do you think of this that we've already done? But from the get-go and that's what we're trying to do.

I'll skip that one. Why does all this matter? I'm hoping you kind of got that already, but I never take anything for granted because that's naughty. What I've done here is I’ve collected in this slide, a bank of evidence of why it matters, so when we send the slides out, you'll be able to, when you've got an hour to spare, you can look. I was asked to give takeaways, this is takeaway number one, I won't be collecting homework, but I did train as a teacher a long time ago. I think, you know, you might enjoy actually looking at why all this matters, because it does matter, we know that. But again, there's a further kind of ‘so what?’, but the evidence base is vast and there are some examples of further reading and each one of these is a hyperlink which will take you to a document which will hopefully triangulate some of the things that I've said, with some of the things that you've heard, with what other people are writing.

Okay. I think I might stop there, but on this last but one slide, just a final note on stickiness. I mentioned Daniel Buren about art exists in its place of making. He was one of those artists that I really got interested in because this is a piece of work that he did that went beyond the gallery. It started out in a gallery space in New York and went out the window on a, he used the wire that you normally use for kind of Christmas decorations and there was a great picture of it in the gallery going straight out the window. At the time, you know, the galleries were like ‘what do you mean, health and safety’ you know, but he did it. He's famous for these stripes, it's exactly the same measurements as the awnings that you find in Paris. It's something very precise and exact and at that time, they were all made that way, but it was this idea of the constraints of the gallery was seen as something to be played with, liberated by constraint. So, that idea of playing with the rules, moving out of your comfort zone, working with others, that's where the Art plus came from, because that's probably the only way we're going to deal with these sticky problems where we've created. I don't want to go on about it, but, you know, we have created a few things that we need to deal with and no one else is going to. Governments aren't going to do it, it's down to us. I was reading recently a really interesting book about we need to get rid of some of the hierarchies and maybe humans aren't as important as we think they are, and perhaps some of the animals and plants are maybe a bit more important than we give them credit. That's, you know, it's taken a long time to kind of cotton on, but this guy wrote this book called Object Oriented Ontology, which basically suggests, although when I hear him speak, he's probably not just suggesting it, he's actually requiring us to think in more democratic systems of thinking around equality and he starts with objects and that's what I was referring to earlier on. An object can be a thing, but it can be an event and, in this book, he goes on to describe how that is and he has a very convincing argument. But he also talks about, you know, actually this was Tim Morton, the object-oriented ontologist is an American chap. This chap is a British chap, and he's talking about this idea of ironic beings, if you like, that humans we kind of adopt a kind of irony sometimes and we are absorbed by the sticky problems in the same way that a wasp is absorbed when it sinks into the jam and drowns in it. That was something that I read in Being in Nothingness by Sartre when he was talking about, you know, observing this wasp. Whereas modern philosophy views humans as transcendent and ironic beings not made of the same stuff as the cosmos in which they dwell. Viscosity teaches the opposite lesson, that we are not forever floating in outer space, but quite the opposite, we are glued to our phenomenological situation, and I think, unlike the ironic viewer of the wasp, we are taking it very seriously.

Okay. I'm going to stop there. But we are having fun at the same time. I’ll take anu questions.