

Jaf Yusuf interviews Nils Norman

Jaf: Hi Nils, it's nice to meet you, albeit virtually. I wanted to ask you first of all what inspired you to be an artist?

Nils: I'm not sure actually because I always wanted to be one. It was always something that I just thought I would be. It's funny because I went to school in Bexhill, Bexhill High School, we had career's officers and when I said I wanted to be an artist they didn't understand what I meant. The Careers Officer couldn't really help me, so she said, well what about being a hairdresser! So it was quite an independent decision I made to go to art school. I ended up going to Hastings Polytechnic, on the foundation there. The only artistic person in my family was my Grandfather, who was an architect but otherwise there's no other artistic bent in my family. I've always drawn, when I was younger I did a lot of cartoon drawings.

Jaf: I've been an art teacher in a Primary School for quite a long time and sometimes children will say to me, 'Mr Yusuf why are you an artist?' and similarly I can't pick out a moment. It's great you mentioned Bexhill and Hastings because I went to Bexhill College and then I went to Hastings Foundation as well. I wanted to ask you about your time in Bexhill and if the area had an impact on you being an artist? Or if you have any memory of that?

Nils: There was a really good art teacher at Bexhill Sixth Form called Mr McCrory, he was really supportive. There was also a really good teacher at Hastings, I can't remember his name, but he was a very inspirational teacher. There were characters that you just thought wow, if that's what it's like to be an artist and a teacher then that's what I want to do, and they were both very supportive. Growing up in Bexhill was funny because as you know it's full of old people but there was the opportunity to be quite creative, particularly with what you wore. There were so many thrift stores, and second hand clothing shops that were really good at that time, tailored suits and handmade things, you could really dress up.

Particularly when I was a teenager, being able to very cheaply buy some really good clothes was quite inspiring.

Also the beach, I think the beach is an amazing place. The promenade and the beach are uncontrolled spaces where you could literally do anything you want. That for me was this amazing playground where together with friends on the weekend we could do whatever we wanted all night without anyone watching us. I think the beaches in most cities or towns still offer that opportunity for people to really do whatever they like without being observed.

Jaf: I think it's really interesting that you mentioned the charity shops because that is literally what I did on Tuesday with my mum. I went around Bexhill and the charity shops because as you said there are so many. I'm thinking also, when I used to go round the shops when I was at that age, 18, 19 and buying clothes, it's a real way of having an identity. Especially in a place that could feel, I mean I say this, but when I was in Hastings it did feel culture-less, now I look around Hastings and I look around Bexhill and I think, oh there's so much culture here! Maybe that was more to do with my perspective and less to do with what was actually going on at the time.

Nils: Yeah, in Hastings there was certainly a kind of bohemian scene around jazz music which I thought was quite interesting. There seemed to be people there who were freer in the way they were thinking. The De La Warr was interesting because at that time the De La Warr was like an empty bus station. It was really just this empty building and there was a caretaker that walked around, completely unlike it is now. It was nearly derelict and you were able to sit in those cantilever staircases for most of the evening, smoking and listening to music and just chatting and then the caretaker would come round at ten and kick you out.

Jaf: Wow!

Nils: It was a very different place then, there was a really nice bar as well. I remember going to lots of concerts there which was great, I don't think they even had exhibitions then because where the exhibitions are now that was a big canteen. That building itself made me feel like it was a very special place because the building was so beautiful and strange in comparison to the rest of the city. St

Leonard's was a bit like that as well because there's so many strange buildings that made it feel quite magical. Strange turreted, castle-like buildings and Victorian, eccentric spaces that made it a mysterious place. I think all those things, together with the beach, made growing up there quite a magical thing.

Jaf: I think when you were talking about the De La Warr Pavilion, I was thinking about reading somewhere that it nearly became a Wetherspoons!

Nils: Haha, yeah that's right!

Nils: The teacher, now I remember his name is Rod Harman! Sometimes we would be life drawing for hours to Verdi's Requiem by candlelight. There was a very tight knit community with the staff because they all lived there, or nearby. I have very good memories of it actually, and you had all these amazing pubs and the old town, sometimes I'd walk home along the beach, so it was very romantic.

Jaf: I suppose whilst we're on the subject of learning and play, I know your practice explores this. I wanted to ask how you approach that first of all and also as I'm about to do teacher training next year, I wanted to ask if you had any advice as someone that has done that sort of thing?

Nils: Well, most of my experience is teaching art school BA level, MA and sometimes PhD students. In my workshops I sometimes work with younger kids but one of the things I think has helped me a lot is being able to listen, and giving time to listen to the students. Because I find that's the best way to understand what's going on, to then enable a conversation. I try to get them more involved by creating a space of learning together, to create a safe space in which kids can learn from each other. My interests in teaching come mainly out of my interest in public space and how public space is produced. Particularly from Situationism and the theory that the Situationists were interested in, for example Henri Lefebvre but also English anarchists like Colin Ward.

Colin Ward in the seventies wrote a book called *Streetwork: The Exploding School* primarily aimed at primary school kids to develop their knowledge and learning around how cities are built and how space is produced. I thought I could adapt that book or some of those ideas to ask students to look at how spaces and cities

are designed in terms of public art. In the late nineties there wasn't really any course or seminar that looked at public art as a discipline. My first teaching job was in Geneva and that's where I started this seminar based around the city as a classroom. Doing site visits, looking at different experiments in terms of collective living, art projects, squats, organic farming, all those alternative types of city activity that we visited and studied together and interviewed people. Situationism and Colin Ward's ideas really helped me to develop what I thought would be interesting to focus on as a teacher.

Jaf: Great, I'll look into those. I went to Milton Keynes a couple of weeks ago and I went to visit MK Gallery, I know you had some involvement. I went round the corner to explore the outside space and there were people skateboarding.

Nils: Oh okay cool.

Jaf: When you were talking about listening, I was thinking about sometimes when I'm in a classroom or in outdoor free-flow spaces, I'm tempted to say, don't do that, and I try and flip that and have a proactive approach. How can we make the spaces work for them? Quite often children have needs that you don't anticipate. Have you got any examples or are there any times where you've created something and anticipated a certain response and had a different response?

Nils: Haha, yeah one was quite recent! Where I teach now in Amsterdam at the Gerrit Reitveld Academie, there's a big open space in the middle of the campus, with a tree and together with some students I've developed a kind of art classroom garden. We created this outdoor space and we also tried to use the space as a cross-departmental meeting place, to develop seminars between different departments. I put together a seminar for the design department which was meant to focus on the garden. It was about a six/seven week long workshop and the idea was that the design department would look at the garden, talk to us about what we needed and what the garden needed; and they would design things like composting units and maybe an outdoor shelter space for social gatherings. So we put this framework together and gave different talks about gardening, garden architecture and utopia, and as the workshop developed, not one group designed anything for the garden! They designed things around the

garden or next to the garden but actually nothing in the garden or anything to do with the garden so they did the complete opposite. They did something very different from what had been suggested and that was quite puzzling to me. In the end it was fine, I just said okay we should get on and do that because like you were saying, I'm also very proactive about following your desires and experimenting.

Jaf: Yeah, haha! Does that ever inform what you might do next?

Nils: Yes, totally. I would probably rethink that and adapt it slightly to a different focus. There have been instances like that where you think it's very clear what you're saying about certain ideas, in terms of an assignment or workshop and then the students do something completely different. That's the beauty, the fun of being at art school because it's just lots of people doing funny experiments and not necessarily following any rules, which I really enjoy as part of being an art school teacher.

Jaf: It's really interesting you saying that, I'm reading a book, called Play Matters by Miguel Sicart. It talks about games and making rules. I think rules almost encourage the opposite. Sometimes I'll set up an art activity and I'll say paint and they'll put their hand in it or something like that, and I can't be too cross with them because, well they're children and they want that sensory experience. I think that's what I really love about teaching, is that it's always a learning experience. It doesn't matter how long I've done it, I'm always surprised.

Nils: It's interesting because I talk with artist friends of mine who are the same age, the same generation who don't teach and you can see that they're still thinking in the same mindset they had in the nineties. I think teaching helps you to learn and continue learning. It really does expand your way of thinking and you get a different perspective on things that you wouldn't have if you were sitting in your studio or talking to the same friends in the pub for the same twenty years. It's an extremely mind-expanding thing to do, particularly as an artist, to be teaching because it really helps you to think about things, it gets you out of certain loops that you get stuck in.

Jaf: Mhm, I think so.

Nils: When you went to Milton Keynes where were they skateboarding?

Jaf: You know you have the entrance, they were on the right hand side.

Nils: Oh right. I worked together with Gareth Jones and 6a architects, [on MK Gallery] we designed everything together: the interior, the signage, the playground, cafe, bookshop, the halls, the hallways, the upstairs auditorium. It was a really amazing project actually, it took about four, five years.

Jaf: I was really interested in the reference points that you used for the creation of that space. This film that I'm making is very much informed by looking at archival photographs of what you'd shown and also your writing. How do you conduct your research when you start a project like that?

Nils: It changes from project to project but what I do is spend time on the site, really being in the space and looking at things. Then I will start to dig deeper into things like ecological issues of the area, habitat, wildlife, the weather, what happens at night in these locations, where the sun is, where shadow is; almost thinking about it as a garden, spending time in it and observing it. Then I'll start to go online and really look at the historical aspects of it.

Luckily with this project, Gareth grew up in Milton Keynes and he's quite a hoarder. He has a huge archive of material related to early Milton Keynes, even the first plastic shopping bags that they had in John Lewis and leaflets, bus tickets, maps, posters and magazines. We went through it together and tried to pick out as much imagery and material that we thought would be relevant to our design work. For example, the colour scheme for the whole building comes from an early 1970's Habitat catalogue from the same year that Milton Keynes was starting to redevelop. In the auditorium, there's a curtain which is a series of horizontal coloured bands and that is the colour chart from Habitat. So it's a mixture of site-specificity in terms of making observations and photographing things and doing a lot of research online but also in local archives. I've found doing stuff online has certain limitations, it's only a surface that you touch upon online and to get any deeper you really need to go to libraries and archives. Also talking to people, we met with some original designers of Milton Keynes and they had their own archives.

Jaf: As you mentioned libraries, do you ever have to negotiate with organisations, do you ever have any barriers to your research that you have to overcome?

Nils: People are usually very open and very friendly. Also, the institution itself is really useful as a key to get into certain spaces. If you write as an individual they might not respond, but if you're the Serpentine Gallery or the Hayward, wherever it is, they'll just say yes. That's one of the useful things about working with institutions, they can give you access to a lot of things that you wouldn't necessarily have access to.

Jaf: And in terms of site-specificity, do you ever visit places that you've been to before? The reason I'm asking is, I'm interested in memory and how people experience spaces and remember it, and part of my film is about that. And I wondered if you ever talk to people that have lived in the area, has that ever informed your research as well?

Nils: Yeah, I do talk to people. I visit a lot of playgrounds and photograph them for my archive. My antithesis for my play archive is around hostile architecture and design, things that prevent you from using them. I do return to sites quite often to see how they've changed or how they've developed because playgrounds can really change through use quite quickly. I go back to take photographs of what's been added or taken away. I designed a bridge in Denmark which I go back to probably every two years to have a look at; it's a large wooden pedestrian bridge and when I'm there I always talk to people. I don't tell them I designed it and I try to get as much information from them as possible about how it works and so on and that really informs me in terms of design for the future.

Jaf: Yeah, it's really interesting. I was just going to ask you actually if you have a traditional artist studio or if the outdoors is your studio, do you bring it with you?

Nils: Well, I do. It's funny because I have a studio in London, in Hackney, but I haven't been there because of Coronavirus. I was commuting by train from London to Amsterdam and then last Spring, the first lockdown, I decided to stay here. While I've been here I haven't had a studio and I don't have access to my library which is quite important for my research. So that's been difficult but I try to make this hybrid way of working which is partly in the studio and partly on the

road. I work on a train or in bars on my own, usually with a sketchbook. I've trained myself to be able to do that through necessity. I've learnt to enjoy that, I really find that quite productive.

Previously, when I had a studio through SPACE in London, that has subsidised studio spaces set up by Bridget Riley. They had a space in Soho on Dean Street and I was given one of those, I had it for five years. I used that space as a social space, I had a lot of readings there, summer schools, workshops, presentations and seminars which weren't affiliated to any institution; it was just off my own interests and my friends' interests. I try to create my studio space as a working social space or activity space and a space where I work as an individual on my own and then I also work when I'm on the road in a more itinerant way.

Jaf. Mhm, okay. I was meant to credit Lara [Aspex Assistant Curator] for that question because she helped me with that question!

Nils: Oh right okay haha!

Jaf. Yeah, it's really interesting that you say that as well because I've never been able to get along with having a studio. Even when I had one at Goldsmiths it wasn't a space that worked for me. Actually I think in a similar way, these in-between spaces; often for me it was the train journey between London and Hastings when I was most productive.

Nils: It is handy if you want to have more of a socially engaged practice where you're actually working together with people. Particularly with education, I find that really helpful as it is a place to meet people and have different informal seminars and workshops, it depends on how you work really.

Jaf. Yeah, I think so. I wanted to ask you about your show at Aspex, Ruins, Monuments and Follies. I was interested in the models you made and you had a bus stop, it had a rainwater harvester and I wanted to talk about environmental concerns. I wondered in the time between then and now; how has our consciousness of the environment changed or is it in our consciousness now or is it always changing?

Nils: I think it's always changing. In the art world it's quite tricky because I think a lot of these things become more like tropes or they're not readable. They become quite empty. I've tried to develop and focus on more sustainable, more integrated activities like gardens and ecological projects. To create a garden in a city, you're producing your own space for a group of people and that is quite an interesting political idea. But I think in terms of ecological issues, there's very little sustainability or ecological component to making art because you're just making new stuff all the time. It's shipped around the world, there's a catalogue and posters and so on, so it's a highly unsustainable practice and industry.

I've tried to look at ways of getting around that somehow because I don't want to stop doing exhibitions because of that but I try to do things in a more site-specific way. For example the project in Milton Keynes, that idea wasn't necessarily looking at sustainability or ecological issues, I adapt my ideas to the locality in a site-specific way. I don't always bring a set of ecological rules or restrictions to what I do, I try and be as sustainable as I can within the context but I don't use them as rigid rules because I think that would be too rigid to do that, too defiant. It is actually quite hard to be ecologically sensitive when you're an artist, of course it's possible but it has a huge amount of restrictions because the industry itself hasn't adapted to a more sustainable way of working. Even if you come to do a show that's about sustainability or you have ecological concerns, the infrastructure that's supporting that exhibition hasn't got those things.

Jaf: Mhm, yeah because I've been thinking about it a lot in terms of, I don't know if you've heard of NFTs, these Non-fungible tokens?

Nils: Yeah, yeah.

Jaf: Well, there's a kind of pressure on digital artists like myself to succumb to that and it's been described as a revolution for digital artists as a way of making money. But it's also got an incredibly awful impact on the environment so there's a conflict there. I think that's kind of what you're touching upon as well that we do have lots of things to negate.

Nils: Yeah, yeah.

Jaf: In terms of site-specificity, the film I'm making is about Hayling Island and it's about how I would play in Hayling Island as a child and also through to an adult. I would often go through bins with my Uncle but also it's the kind of environment where you have people with enormous amounts of money and people with very little in very close [proximity].

Nils: Right, yeah.

Jaf: I was thinking as adults, if we continue to play and when we continue to play, can that still have a negative impact on the environment if I'm not conscious of the way that I want to play. I wanted to ask what you thought about the idea because often play is associated with children and young people and I wondered what your thoughts were on playing as an adult?

Nils: Yeah, that's the one thing that I enjoy about being in an art school, if it's a good art school, it's a huge building full of people playing. That for me is a utopian idea of an institution where people are experimenting, playing and doing strange things, having weird conversations. I think art schools allow for that kind of playfulness and strangeness to continue and to happen. Once you've left school and once you're outside of that context it's much more difficult to do that because you're trained to be more self-aware and less performative. Particularly with the way that CCTV works and the way that spaces are now much more heavily surveilled, people just think you're up to no good, or it's a little bit suspicious so it's difficult to be more spontaneous in spaces as they become more controlled.

I have a son and when he was younger he would play on the sofa for hours and the sofa would be this huge mountain range, or then it would be a desert or a spaceship. I would play with him but I couldn't maintain it for more than ten minutes before I got confused or I'd just hit a wall, thinking what do I do now? There's this other expansive mindset when you're a child that you lose as an adult.

Jaf: It's really interesting you say that because a lot of the times I would consider some of the most exciting times that I had in Hayling Island were with my Uncle, who would do lots of different things, like selling things on eBay and going through bins with me. I think I had this kind of ideal scenario as a child, where I would say, I wanted to do this and he'd say okay let's do it! And we would just do

things, like he would drive me to a car park and start driving and take his hands off the wheel and say 'you've got to drive otherwise we're gonna crash'. What I think now, especially working within a school, is that he was really great at negating risk and allowing me to see what I could do and what I couldn't do within my own limitations. I suppose the reason I think about that a lot, is because I think how can I manage those because I often see children in London not getting a huge amount of outdoor space, or not getting this sense of limitlessness and how I can try and incorporate that into learning and just generally into life I suppose.

Nils: Tim Gill has a really amazing blog ([Rethinking Childhood](#)) he has done a lot of research into children, play and space. He uses this analogy where the great-grandparents would have the whole city as a place to walk around and play during the day and their great-grandchildren only have their living room and over the decades this map just gets smaller and smaller in terms of where children are given the permission to play. If you look at virtual space it expands back in another way, so the map gets smaller but it starts to increase internally within you, within your mind. But I think the problem with that is that it's all controlled by corporations, even though you have this freedom. My son has an Oculus headset and he plays with all his friends from different countries but it's still linked to buy[ing] stuff and to membership so it's a freedom but it's highly controlled in that respect, financially.

Jaf: Mhm, well I play computer games with my friends as adults and I would go as far as saying it got me through the lockdown. It was an escape because I was quite isolated this time last year, because I was also living with my Grandmother with Alzheimers in the house. And it was a room, about two by two metres, it was absolutely tiny but then suddenly I'd put the headset on, my friends would be there and I felt like I was socialising, I felt like I was in another world. When you were talking about it being monetised and commercialised, I was thinking about loot boxes, because the way they make money is through these boxes that you pay and you don't know what you're gonna get in them, even just paying to change your outfit or to enhance what you're doing in some way.

Nils: Yeah, I noticed that with Fortnite because you start having to pay for things within the game, just to buy a new backpack costs like 90 euros!

Jaf: Yeah. When I was animating my film, I was animating bins opening and I put a light inside them to be animated like this sensation you get when you get something out of a loot box. I didn't have loot boxes when I was a child but if I did, it was probably when I opened these bins and found all this stuff and I didn't know what it was, and most of it was rubbish but it was just that sense of the unknown and it being an amazing feeling.

Nils: Yeah, I think these spaces have potential to really open up play but it's just a matter of time to see how that works. I used to use Second Life when it first started, which is a virtual 3D world that you could fly around and build things in. I built some artworks because I was very bad at using AutoCAD, a 3D drawing programme, so I used Second Life to build sculptures to scale, before we used SketchUp. For example this bridge I was talking about in Denmark, I built that in Second Life first to get a sense of scale and then I would inhabit it with my Avatar, walk around and build bits on it and then photograph it and export the photos into Illustrator and re-draw them. It was actually a very handy way to make artworks online, to play with them as well. I visited Second Life in the first lockdown because a friend of mine who teaches asked me to visit with his students and I realised it was actually very clunky and unintuitive. But one of the things I realised is that very quickly, people set up normative things that they would've just done in real life and that is disappointing.

Jaf: I think that's part of my interest in animating and working in 3D animation. Often I will start by bringing something that I know in real life and recreating it but it's almost in that transition, that's where the art happens. Not in the choosing what you wanna make but oh I've put this here and actually what would be really interesting is if I completely change the scale of it compared to what it might be in real life. I suppose that's a lot of where my practice has come from. One of the first things that helped me do this was a housing proposal in Hastings to build right out into the sea, all they'd released was a map view of it, so I wanted to recreate it like you said, to see it really. This was from the opposite perspective, I was kind of almost devastated that they wanted to build in this particular place that had quite a lot of importance to me, that I just needed to see it. That became the foundation for the work and the building emerged from the sea and did the opposite of what it was supposed to do. I think in remaking something

that's real in this imaginary space, there was a lot of learning and a lot of play.

Nils: Yeah. I definitely learnt a lot playing, and making the bridge in Second Life, that was really helpful.

Jaf: My final question is, what are you currently working on and have you got any upcoming projects that we can look out for?

Nils: I've recently been invited to do a few things all of a sudden, I think as Coronavirus lifts, in Northern Denmark, in Southern Italy, in Munich and I also have to go back and do things in Cambridge. They're all outdoor things, public space, public art related things. The only thing I know for sure what I'm doing is in Cambridge, there's a community garden which is part of the development that I've been working on, and the gardeners would like a social space. I'm going to design that for them so I'm going to visit Cambridge in a couple of weeks, have a look, do some drawings and make some proposals for them.

Jaf: Mhm, great. Well, thank you! That's been really interesting for me.

Nils: You're welcome, that's good! Thanks for inviting me.