

Arts Lancashire: The Podcast Series 3

- Hello, and welcome to series three of The Gathering, a podcast for artists and creatives from Arts Lancashire. The series is all about exploration and features, recorded conversations led by Lancaster based artists, discussing things and ideas that are important to their practice and the future of their work. I'm Garth Gratrix. I am a visual artist, a curator, and the founding director of Abingdon Studios, a contemporary visual art studio space by the sea in Blackpool. And it was the first to be established back in 2014. In this episode, we're exploring the idea of the Coast Is Queer, and I wanted to invite another artist and dear friend and collaborator Harry Clayton-Wright to join me today. So it really lovely to hear from you, Harry, introduce yourself.

- Good morning. Hello, how are you?

- Amazing.

- How are you?

- I'm very well, thanks so much for having me. This is really exciting. It feels like we are allowing people just hear our natters of which we do quite a lot. And so, yeah, this is very lovely and welcome to minor Garth's regular gossip.

- Correct, that's what you're gonna get today, everyone.

- Yeah. Yeah. So my name is Harry Clayton-Wright. I'm a performance artist, writer, and radical creator from Blackpool. I work across theatre, installations, zine and film. My debut solo theatre shows Sex Education premiered in 2017, at the Brighton Fringe Festival and won the LGBTQ award, which was far up. I took it to Edinburgh. It was nominated for a Total Theatre Award for emerging artist and company, which was a really lovely process. I've worked with director David Wilson on a short film We made called "Deep Clean," I've made installations, a 107-hour performance called the Slumber Party, and then a 14 day marathon performance called The Fortnight where I premiered 14 brand new eight hour durational performance pieces across 14 days, which are performed at Abingdon Studios. And yeah, I've just sort of general mischief maker and provocateur. And it's lovely to be able to like, yeah, chat with you for this podcast, Garth, thank you very much for having me.

- No, absolutely. I think there's so many crossovers between our work to date, the different ways we've worked together, our approaches as queer people who also kind of take on some responsibility around queer leadership and questioning around how the odds can work for roles and for all the people that identify like us. So there's something around this particular podcast and this ethos of the Coast Is Queer that I think is really useful to discuss particularly around artists at least in

across Lancashire, organizations listening across Lancashire. I think it's just a really interesting level of insight to give from people that choose to live by the sea, as opposed to it's circumstantial, and what we do with that in terms of ownership around that days and activity moving forward. I think there's something around just share maybe the title itself and how that came about of the Coast Is Queer. And for me as an artist, I've been back in Blackpool since 2013, I was doing research around the need for our studio spaces, where there was no workspace on particularly no voices that correlate to what I wanted to do as an artist in the area as well. There was this idea of just trying to be visible and take up space. And then this idea that the coast is often stigmatized as being on the edge of mainstream cultural opportunities not necessarily quite matching or living up to what people's idea or spectacle is. I'm not really honing in on the coast as a significant area of research or an important balance between self care and wellbeing and the way that artists live and work effectively. And with some level of thriving, not just surviving, I like to explore, I guess, our own perceptions and ways of working as queer people, obviously you've shared a lot of your experience already and the different ways that you've worked and been commissioned. I think there's something around shared a little bit more as to what queer means to you.

- Well, I didn't necessarily encounter this concept, the word being positive. When I grew up in Blackpool, I do think that it still has, for some people, not just in Blackpool but all over a different meaning, but I've definitely here for the reclamation. I identify as queer. My pronouns are he, they, and I'm very much about queerness is political. My existence, my work is political as well. And I do think that Blackpool, well, it does have a really strong LGBTQ community and history, the sort of queerness feels like and obviously within national conversation as well, it feels like it's coming up. Like, I don't feel like I grew up very aware of that. I felt like they sort of gay scene was very much like part of where I grew up in Blackpool, but in terms of when I moved around the country and started to speak to lots of different types of people, queerness is something that came to me and then I feel like that's something I moved home and managed to like find other queers in Blackpool. And it felt like a different space than the one I grew up in. And I don't know if you can talk about that yourself, Garth, in terms of your relationships to your queerness and where you found that and whether you found queerness in Blackpool to be a journey.

- Yeah, I mean, as someone that's really only moved away, I've always been in Lancashire. Obviously my work itself I've exhibited internationally Norway, Sol, Iceland, I've done all over the UK. I've got work in collections, but as an artist I've always lived in Lancashire and often people are surprised by that. Why don't you live in Blackpool? This often comes as a question rather than, ah, right, that's exciting. I've heard lots of good things about Blackpool because often people don't say that they got to go, "Oh, I've heard all the stigma or the perceptions of that place, but I've never been myself." So I kind of work in my queerness in the way I identify, inevitably I am one of many cis white gay men, but the culture here is also very G in the LGBTQ, and I don't necessarily just operate in that way. I don't want to be in the bars and the clubs all night long in that sense. So my queerness is trying to, particularly through my art, explore that slipperiness of lived experience that is slightly different to what they expect it is as a person or a queer body. There's not wanting to be the court jester in that sense as to a comedian from Blackpool at the end of the pier, and that has its place as long as we own that identity. And we're commissioned to present the identity for ourselves. Well, when you're invited in that sense, it feels a little bit tokenistic. So for me my queerness is around slipperiness of language, how things appropriate and cultivate inevitably from one thing to another, we know we're working with the term queer in a different way when we're talking right now from what its original

origin was. So there's something about accepting and holding on slipperiness and the absurdity and comedy of that. You can't hold on to slipperiness. It's slightly ironic. So that's kind of how I approach it artistically rather than it's just about personal identity. So also about conceptual thinking within queer art and queer making.

- Yeah.

- And you've lived everywhere, Harry.

- Oh, I have.

- You have been all over.

- I have notched up some miles and yeah, pre-pandemic I used to be a touring performance artist, and that was a massive part of my income and life. And obviously when everything hit last year, everything went and immediately one of the loveliest things to know, and I feel very grateful and lucky and privileged, I'm aware that not everyone can do this. And so I was able to go home to my mom's house and I moved back into my childhood bedroom and moved back to Blackpool. And I've always tried to keep a relationship with Blackpool within my work, every time I've made a new project, I've always tried to have one of its site premiere seasons in Blackpool while I've made it to keep Blackpool very much about the conversation in my work, but I was often based in Brighton between 2015 and 2020 when I wasn't touring. And yeah, I moved home and it was the best decision I could've made. It's been a wonderful year to be home, to be embraced and very much a part of the Blackpool contemporary arts scene and with the creatives and independence and organizations here, I feel a lot of love and support. I feel very lucky for that as well. Yeah, it's been very lovely to come home, that feeling of familiarity as well, like a new appreciation for the local area and all the things there. And I think that that was something that a lot of people found because of COVID and because of having to spend more time in a locality, it was like, "Oh, I'm seeing my home in a way that I've not seen it." And I'm appreciating it differently, which has been a massive part of the last year. I don't know if you felt that.

- Yeah, I have. I think there's something about being forced to be in proximity to where you are from, and this metaphorical ball that's going around everyone's lives at the moment of you just have to deal with where you are. You can't be wandering off. You can't be spontaneous in the way that your work might carry you somewhere else at the moment, because either there isn't any work.

- Yeah. You can't go and perform or you can't open your gallery. So you just have to figure out new arms in the way that practice can evolve. A lot of the Coast Is Queer elements of this kind of title and research that I've been doing. A lot of funded opportunities has been around consultation, trying to engage with other art spaces nationally and keeping Blackpool on the map for its contemporary

uniqueness and its rich and unique culture rather than it's archaic old nostalgic references. A lot of the time I'm personally trying to activate a conversation around the need for contemporary visual practice in a town like Blackpool. And why aren't we pushing the cultural significance of place in the way that we talk about place making. There's so much around the economy of Blackpool and its tourism. We often forget to research around that was built on cultural experience as well. It wasn't just built for that. It was about coming to an alternative culture and it was also about respite as well. So a lot of my work has been trying to plan out the next steps something Abingdon, for example, we won't work leisure, which is a residency program that invites artists to come and stay in the town like Blackpool, be in a period of rest and care for themselves and just hold space for them with a budget. But then to just think about ideas rather than the expectation to make, which I feel is really personal in the current climate. We still need to allow people to recalibrate in the way that they're gonna develop work, rather than we can open a game, give us a show by next week, which I've also had that opposite experiences. Now artists coming straight out of lockdowns even though we are still in a pandemic, I've done five shows in two months, all over the country, Brighton, Middlesbrough, Liverpool, Lancaster and back to Blackpool. So it's been a weird terrain of being in lockdown, but having to go and work, like there's a pressure cooker there if you've got to go and do that because you need the payment from your funder before it runs out. But then also really having that important time to just be in your home with the cats. The cat is called jelly bean, who is my icon and goddess and keeps me on the straight and narrow. But yeah just being able to sit with a cat and research or there are spaces across the country and try and stay in an ambitious way of thinking in the way that our spaces in Lancashire progress outward, not just thinking with a lot at the time. I was interested when you were talking about when you've been away from Blackpool for so many years, and then coming back and you've talked loosely about perception. What was your perception of Blackpool as an artist early doors? Like what wasn't it doing for you?

- Well, growing up in Blackpool instantly like my first offer of a job was when I was 18 at Butlins Skegness. And I came back to Blackpool when I was like in my 20s and worked on kind of Skis Ghost train on the seafront. I worked at the sea life center as a mascot, getting rugby tackled by a stag and hen parties. And I sort of loosely started developing a solo practice in Blackpool, which then became a stronger, so the practice in the way that initially I started uploading deliberately bad parody videos on YouTube of popular music videos. And from that I got invited to London to be part of the London cabaret scene, which took me to a more sort of Edinburgh Fringe Festival and that sort of theatre cabaret world. And I started touring go into Glastonbury, and then I started going to Australia. And so all these opportunities arose for me outside of Blackpool. And I did try and either make or do work in the town, but I do feel like I had to go away to learn a lot practically about myself, about the world, about the work that I want to make and have these experiences. I mean, I think sometimes we talk about it in terms of the brain drain, in terms of Blackpool, and retaining talent and trying to create and keep local creatives around because there aren't necessarily as many opportunities. And so sometimes you do have to find the places to go. I was very thrilled. The first time we collaborated together was something you invited me to do, which was the we're here exhibition as part of Blackpool pride 2014, which was the first exhibition as part of Blackpool pride, which I was honoured to be part of. And that sort of started also building a different type of like collaboration and working method in the town. Yeah, that was very thrilling. And so I feel like I've always tried to have my finger in the Blackpool pie, but oftentimes a majority of work, I would say like 90 to 95% came from elsewhere. And sometimes you do have to follow that, and COVID wiped all of that out and allowed me to move home and then start thinking in a different way where now we're working digitally or now we're working locally and that's wonderful and stuff to aim for. But I think in terms of the way

that theatre and performance was, you went to Edinburgh to take your show, to then try and book tour. It was all about being in lots of different places, and now that that's all changed. But in terms of my perception of Blackpool, it has changed over time. And I think a place is what you make of it. And we all have the responsibility to kind of make the work we want to see and bring the work we want to see, or like start the conversations we want to hear in a place. And I do think that we, there are others in Blackpool as well, I don't wanna sort of just say that we're the only ones doing it 'cause that's never the case. Like being in Blackpool is so full of like wonderful creatives and like independent organizations that just like absolutely champion talent and creativity. BTW we could all use more money like round here. So I just wanna say that. But yeah, I've just been really inspired by, in awe of like the local creatives here. I've always loved the heritage element of Blackpool in terms of its rich entertainment history, which is something that you can't help a riff off like in is someone who has made entertainment in the past. I do feel deeply inspired by Blackpool and the type of work that I see as I grew up from being young at the circus to funny girls, like it all sits in your brain because Blackpool is so vivid, but one of the most amazing things to me is like a young person was that a career in the arts in terms of performance was accessible because it was right on my doorstep that these fabulous people were entertaining people seven days a week. So it never felt fetched that I would do this because it was just at the town. You could go and see eclipse at the pleasure beach. You could go to the circus, you could go wherever and see like performance. So yeah, I think my perception of Blackpool has always been that it's a wonderful place for inspiring people, but the types of artwork that I definitely kind of discovered when I went to different places like London and Brighton that aren't necessarily as presented in Blackpool was something that I knew I was yearning for. And it's now something that I try and do and bring back and make part of a conversation here as well.

- And it's something around the infrastructure isn't there? Certainly looking back at 2014 or even further, when we talk about looking for a career in the arts, that's not something on a working class level in Blackpool growing up, there was even a conversation or an opportunity that was shared to you. And living through section 28 in the education system. Mark did the speech at the conference in Blackpool in Schiff. Like, we think we have an inalienable right to be gay as if it's like how dare you. So, A, you weren't discussed as a human being and B, in the class in system that we lived in and then around families weren't telling you you can be an artist because that's just paint and then drawing and you need to go and be a nurse or something, which thank God in the current climate, I chose to quit my nursing degree and go and follow a career in the arts not knowing where that's gonna take me. Well then also I think that also embed a level of gumption and audacity. Like I do have the audacity to say, I'm going to be an artist and I'm going to figure that out. And then I'm going to be that skill where I'm from. So the older people can see that you can do it. And again, that's not to say that other people aren't doing that in their disciplines and what they represent. There's great new spaces opening around us every few months. At the moment it feels this level of independence rather than organizations that are funded at the moment. There's a lot of independent activity, which we have the privilege to be in dialogue with as well. Haven't we?

- Yeah,

- There's something around you're feeling that you're part of something that was never there before and that it feels important and it feels necessary. It's not just another thing that's happening in maybe a city or it's not a cyclical conversation as self-congratulatory. A lot of the time that can happen in the arts. It's happening whether you want it to happen or not. And I think that's something really fascinating for me at the moment particularly around queer leadership and seeing all the queer people moving back here and wanting to have collaborative conversation and wanting to see things in enhance and enrich more people's experiences of encountering diversity of the way things are made, the way people talk, the way people present. It's just becoming much more exciting and rich as a landscape book, as you said, by the way, that's still not funded. So we still need money to sustain that.

- And that's the thing. I think there's amazing opportunities here. I feel like in Blackpool, you can carve your own path destination aesthetic in a much freer way because I think it's a looser environment to play in. So that's something I've very much found. And obviously you've kind of got that backdrop of traditional entertainment, but everything else that goes against that feels really exciting and radical, and there's a lot to be done in Blackpool. And it just feels like a very inspiring place. It's like living in a movie set and you go to these wonderful heritage buildings just really casually as if it's normal that you just can pop to Blackpool hotel ballroom and the circus and the grand theatre, the winter gardens, there are sort of incredible heritage venues. And they're just on the doorstep they're just really normal that they're there. But as you say, there's so many wonderful independent organizations and initiatives that are happening in Blackpool both creatively and otherwise in terms of like local cafe culture, independent muscle shops, the LGBTQ Charity Shop in Fleetwood, there's now an LGBTQ cafe. And I think that there's a real sense of like there's, I don't know, I hate the sort of phrase up and coming, but it feels like there's an excitement and a sort of defiance and resilience and yeah just a sort of confidence in just giving things a red hot go in Blackpool, but I'm loving that spirit that is also very inspiring to be around.

- Yeah, and I think particularly within this notion of queer people that I guess are activists in the arts of we need to see more opportunity. We need to commission and pay people fair day rates like day rates all this, this is our experience that's in your budget anyway, or should be because you are funded. So I am sure you've broken it down in a way that those evidence fair a question mark. So there's something to my experience that having to be a director of Abingdon for eight years, predominantly voluntary unless we get project funding rather than any core funding. And then you pay yourself a novelty little pat on the back fee to manage a number of commission opportunities through other artists and join lockdown. I think there was something really self-reflective in terms of competence of you often run an artist led space in the way that you think, ah, it's just another thing in the landscape. It's nice to have. It's important. I need workspace for me. So, you know it's reciprocal in the way that it works and evolves for artists, but when COVID happened, there was very little visibility of what any commission opportunities were for artists in the landscape through vessels that are bad for talent development specifically. So just from picking up when you mentioned about talent and retention earlier. I could really only see Abingdon's responsibility becoming very much about that and all through COVID. We as an organization which is one of the few unfunded ones in the terrain spent over 15,000 pounds of our reserves that we've squirreled away over eight years, just in case we ever have to move venue or building, which is always a precarious thing in the arts in Blackpool as well. Who's gonna help you stay in a building. How do we get at least longer than a year, but every year you're going, am I safe here? Do I have to plant again?

I've got to replan again and then just putting all of that money into artist's pockets and giving commissions, giving day rates, giving money to artists to collaborate with artists outside of Blackpool and Lancashire, and making sure that I still connected whilst they're also in isolation and where people are at the helm at the moment of supporting the arts ecology. And I think that's really fascinating in the way that usually we're having to operate in clandestine ways for safety and self care. Whereas actually there's a lot of those now at the helm going, come on, what are we going to do about all of this?

- I would definitely say that I think that her last year has shown in many ways, how much we all have a role to play and how much we have to use that platform we have in the way that we speak and also provide opportunities for others. And it has been fantastic to see the amount of artists that you've worked with over the last year, and yeah, as an independent organization, to be able to like have offered that support and to just done it so quickly it was just what needed to be done. And I think, that looking out for each other and like the community is inherent in queerness, I also found it was like, well, what can I do? What can I make or do that provides money resource opportunities to others. And similarly very proud to have made a project, which was a theme in lockdown. You ought to know that was able to like work and get money to over 20 artists in the last year. And that's me just as an independent, like just knowing that I have a responsibility and what can I do for others? How can I help? It's been a really tricky year. And similarly, I think identifying that, like with you and Abingdon needing a space and me kind of understanding, well, if I don't have a stage to perform on anymore, what do I have? And how can I utilize my skills and also showcase and platform the work of many other talented people I know that it just felt like, yeah, there was a lot within the last year that made me very proud to be a queer artist. And I think, yeah, leader in terms of the conversations that we've orchestrated behind the scenes as well. And we can obviously talk about future projects later, but there's some obviously very exciting things that I think we've identified and been able to work on and work towards going forward. That's a sneaky plug to stay listening for things that are gonna drop later.

- I think this is something that like let's start with those collaborations. Let's share our experience of collaborating over the last 18 months and previously, we first met, as you said, when I curated the first pride exhibition inhabited showcase in Blackpool with Blackpool pride and left coast CPP put money into that and arts councils, thank you very much. And then that was an opportunity to be visible as a curator, not just a local artist in the landscape, there's something about our collaborations that enrich our own practice and the importance of collaboration that I think is really nice to talk through. Like for example, I mentioned that done the five collaborations in the last two months, but that's been a six month process of receiving my own arts council grant to continue this kind of savings that I do called in collaboration with which previously we've done it, grungy art gallery as well as part of a solo show called Shy Girl like it there. And then embedding this collaboration program of working with other artists to showcase, again, the slipperiness of not holding to ransom what a contemporary visual artist does or makes or includes in their work a lot of the time, why can't it be live performance? Why can't it become just text one day just as a clown? So that's eight collaborations in the last year that me as an artist has found money for, to invest in supporting other queer identifying artists or people. And then I know like let's elaborate more on your collaborations that you've been doing as well.

- Wow, with you or to know there were four issues in which I was able to work with some amazing artists who are also pals. Well, I just sort of reflected them as like I've got so many wonderful pals who I can just call up and be like, "Hey, I've got a little bit of money that I can get to you. Would you like to present your work as part of this zine project with doing?" Which was through the format of being inspired by the graphic design of Vintage Erotica and top shelf publications from the '70s, '80s, and '90s. So like creating a sort of like vintage porn and mark aesthetic, but putting artists many of whom were on stages into the pages of this online scene. And it's just been a sort of really, really, really wonderful project to work on with Peter Collins AKA Polari Press an independent design publishing house in London who I just messaged him was like, "Hey, would you help me make this digitization project? I don't have any shows anymore." And we've just created something that I feel is really beautiful and a lovely experience that seems to have resonated with a lot of people. It's been viewed online by people in up to nearly 70 countries. It would take me so long to tour to that many places. And it's been a wonderful experience, very holistically. Garth, I have a question for you, and that's about your relationship to plus and queerness coming from Blackpool and how that affects you when you work in the sort of art world outside of Blackpool, but then also how you come back and navigate working in the town and how that affects you. Because I am aware that sometimes it can be quite difficult in terms of, I know certain art worlds aren't necessarily welcoming to certain types of people and yeah, just your experiences with that.

- Yeah, I think class for me, inevitably as soon as there's austerity or concerns economically, inevitably middle class or upper class people can sustain an arts career because so much of it needs to be self-funded or lifted up or supported through family within the arts. There's often no guarantee of what might come back economically from that cost and to live and work in London, just so that you are associated to the best of the best in the way that you might have to play the game. And then sometimes a barrier to that is class because with working class you are below the breadline. My upbringing is on the poverty line in how the way that we categorize that as a culture and a country. And we didn't have much. Everything I've achieved is through working three jobs, traveling onto our bosses back and forth to go to the nearest university and then still go back home and bring the pizza from the pizza shop I worked in until 1:00 AM in the morning, inevitably we are heavily working class culture. 18 million visitors a year to Blackpool like sustains that comment, but it is the majority or were often made to feel like we're the inferior. So there's something in the past in my experiences it has created anxiety of going into rooms. I've done terrible interviews for jobs outside of Lancashire. I've been shortlisted twice for Clore Leadership and I think that great, I'm not gonna select them off for not selecting me, your loss at the end of the day. But it was very much to do with my own perceptions of myself going into a forum like Somerset House in London and sitting with a semicircle of people around me asking me questions that I haven't quite prepared myself for because I was too concerned that I wasn't gonna be impressing off because I'm where I'm from. And I think stigma and perceptions of place do embed in your behavior a lot of the time growing up like, oh, maybe we can't, maybe we shouldn't. And you question things rather than just animate and crack on. So I think there's definitely been a decade of anxiety and feeling closeted in my own self belief, but also my identity. And then just going, do you know what? Sitting in that space all I ever get is that sense of I'm not achieved my full potential. So I just need to get over this now and crack on. So now I see it as a form of power and privilege that I am different to other people in the room and I have something different to say, and I have evidence that I have achieved these things. So whilst you might sit in that room because of maybe who you're associated with, I sit in this room because I've paid the way to get to that table. So it's just a different way of having to remove limiting beliefs and just accept your achievements, which I think you've known me for many years. I can

often talk myself down. It's like the laborer in the way that we think about development of opportunities.

- Late stage capitalism we're judged by like productivity and output and can there ever be enough versus like, actually, are we happy? Are we thrilled with the work we're making? But I think what you're talking about in terms of the arts, not necessarily always as a welcoming space and going into meetings and feeling inferior is something that I have very much felt. And yeah, it's a tough one to, and I think does that ever go away, and is it just about learning to manage it and also working with people who respect that and celebrate that and welcome you because of that where your perspective is different as a result and it's harder and then it's... I've still sort of got elements where sometimes I feel like, what am I doing in the arts? And then I just have to like talk myself down from the ledge as well. 'Cause I think it can be something that stays with you.

- Yeah, and I think inevitably we shouldn't be holding on to what the arts is. The systems, the ways things are gonna have to evolve, the way things are working now, most people that have had success in things or things we look up to about some level of alternative or about ethical approach to what was already there. And that's not about disruption as a negative it's about-

- Queering the norm.

- It's about queering the norm. It's about agitating something that's stagnating. we've got to keep testing. We have to keep questioning. We have to keep putting different feet forward or dipping our toe in the sand. All the coastal references now-

- Queerness as survival at being able to approach your working practice with that extra element of being able to understand that you need to approach things differently because that's how you approach life.

- Yeah, and also not being shamed in the idea that we're asking for pay as artists it almost seems audacious, how dare you ask for money. It's like, well, hang on, you're a funder, I'm an artist, I deliver for you. That's payment in any other industry, it would just be, if there's a transaction that has to happen before you ask me to do any work. But I guess I have a question for you, Harry.

- Hit me.

- So you've mentioned class to me and perceptions. I think there's something given your body of work and where you are now and what you have done over the years. I guess what your perceptions are and experiences are around work that deals with sex and in very visible around sex and body and whether that's body positivity or not, or whether that's just about showing desire rather than

deviance. I'm really curious about your experience in how visible you have been with your body and any impact that that's had in terms of the perceptions of you as an artist in the way that you work with people.

- I mean, yeah, a lot of the work that I make has dealt with radical body politics and I've made work that is quite explicit and everything is contextual as well in terms of like coming up through cabaret, which in terms of like starting at Butlins then going into cabaret and being in venues like which really support that type of experimental performance art with night side ducky. For example, whether there's such a rich history and heritage of artists who all do that, I'm not new. I'm not sort of doing anything that hasn't necessarily been done before, but I'm still I feel like I'm continuing a tradition of artists who explore their body in their work. And one thing that is quite interesting to me is that I think it was quite tricky at first in terms of always trying to make people see it as art, because I loved the idea of artistic expression could do that. And I think I have tared the line in terms of being explicit on social media as a form of like provocation against heteronormativity and the way that you should be seen, and also deep clean. There's a video of me that if you boiled it down quite explicit, it's an insertion act and I'm doing something with a vacuum cleaner that many people probably dream of doing, but I'm doing it. But the point with that film is that it's directed by a Grammy nominated director. The production values are pure Hollywood, and we've really tried to take something that could be seen in a certain light to the sort of level of spectacle that it deserves. And David really pushed for that. And insurance companies turned us down like people wouldn't touch his locations, like refuse to let us film there because of the content of the work. But we really wanted to see that type of radical anarchic performance that we love in clubs in a different context. And it was really hard to get it done. And so I will always love that kind of work. And I think now I'm really interested as well about having different conversations coming from that and seeing how people respond to that, like body of work that I've built and I'm really proud of it. And it's done wonderful things like deep clean, went to South by Southwest and like was premiered by Knowles and sex education. My show has taught, went to Sydney Mardi Gras and it's done really well. In Edinburgh at the Fringe Festivals. So I think I've always just tried to present that work with such a tongue in cheek smile. And I would say a Blackpool cheekiness and to die element that I think I've been able to, I wouldn't say get away with it, but I've been able to get it to the back of the net. And it's not always been easy. It's been challenging to have been met with a lot of nos, hesitancy behind the scenes, so of, ah, what's he doing? What is this? But at the end of the day the work I feel like has spoken for itself and the energy that I've tried to approach with it has allowed me to convince people, but it is in terms of respectability politics, I don't know what I'm going to live with later in life for having done this and putting work out there like that. And I would like to hope that we live in a society that is very much like it's just sex, it's just a body, no big deal. But I also know that's not the case in a country that deals with shame in ways which are quite tricky. So yeah, but for me, context is key. Like it lives in an artistic homes, it is artistic, and that's not what I do all the time every day, but it's like in terms of pure fantasy as well, it's been something that has been quite fun to construct. And if I'm allowed to, I don't know if I'm allowed to swear, but F with people, so to speak, as well in that sort of joyful middle fingers up, but kind of like, ha ha look at this, look what I can do tie, ti hi hi hi which I definitely kind of had that really like that energy when I was like in my 20s about really wanting to just go there.

- I really love like your body of work is so eclectic and diverse even though there is commonality through it, there is consideration. You approach things very much as an artist with a body of work

that's really well-considered and contextualized as you say it's important. It's not just about shock value. It's not just about throwing something out there. Your asked to society are also planned and thought through. And there's a reasoning behind that in the time that you're doing it with the people you're doing it with. And that's just about people forgetting the artists are also conceptual thinkers and good project managers for themselves as well. And as a really lovely quote in an educational way about looking about sex and bodies by Sasha Kazantseva who's like a Russian blogger and journalist. And she said, "Maybe if we learn about the importance of diversity self-reflection and communication in our sexual lives, we'll see that these things are essential in other areas of our lives too." And I really like that we actually can deal with self and sex. We can understand the better way of just living in the world with anyway and that things are more fluid than we ever give them credit for.

- I like that.

- Likes throwing a but there's also the inherent completeness of your work and within mine, and maybe more of an object and abstract way there is completeness. And there's an inevitability of our upbringing and being from Blackpool that does feature aesthetically or conceptually in the way that our work evolves and presents itself.

- I've always found calmness as one of those tools to be able to come in and hit people, make them laugh and disarm them and then pull the rug out. Like it's one of these tools in my artillery that I'm able to like win you over with a sort of laugh, a cheeky wink and then I'm able to go there. So I found like camp to be a really useful tool to subvert. And I do remember Butlins hosting a show as a camp 18 year old being in front of audiences who are like, "Right, who's this?" And just having to work and make people laugh and then being able to like win them over. And so I think that has come to me and been really useful in terms of engaging people, but then also being able to pull the rug out from underneath as well and subvert within that.

- And I know the clang for you really, 'cause there's just been so much good output at a time when people think, oh, I saw him being active in the ways that they expect to see art or come in the collection that you did with the Harris Museum and Art Gallery in Preston. It's just a phenomenal collection of video material if anyone's not seen it.

- Yeah, I'm so grateful to Catherine Mugonyi who used to work at the Harris Museum and gave me the opportunity and thought that I would be able to interpret the collections through the lands of cam. And, yeah, we created a three-part video series and it was just amazing to be sort of let loose in that kind of building and to, yeah, sort of toe the line of like, what can you get away with in this context? And I feel like that's a lot of my career is like what can I get away with in this context? How far can I push it? But specifically like throughout the whole thing and thank you very much for saying so, I feel like the commonality is quality in that I really like things to be of a certain quality that is undeniable, so that you feel comfortable instantly looking at a piece of work that I've made, 'cause I do often think as well, like if I can relax you in terms of like, "Okay, you're in for a good time or a

laugh, then we can really go there." And I think that that's something that I'm quite proud of. And I feel like is in my wheelhouse, I have a question for you, Garth.

- Right, go.

- What advice would you give either your younger self or to a young queer artist who is just starting out? What would you say to little Garth as a certain host might say, no, that's sort of learned experience. And what would you sort of say to champion and sort of encourage that person?

- Well, firstly, I don't refer to it as little Garth. Secondly, how hilarious for anyone listening, we told each other, we'd ask you some questions of each other in between the chat today, and I have made that same question written down as if we're both on RuPaul's Drag Race. So we're holding little portraits of each other now as children. I would say if you knew what you're doing now which hindsight's a wonderful thing is next don't tell yourself no for too many years, don't talk yourself out of the ideas that are in your head. That just leads to frustration rather than opportunity, go away to comeback as we've both done as artists as well. I did take advice 10 years ago, if you're not gonna get the job you want in Blackpool because you're just from here. So you need to go away and prove yourself and come back. I did, is still a struggle. But I'm here on my own terms now. So there's something about owning your shi without swearing. And just if someone says, no, find another way around to get into the building, find the backdoor, no pun intended and smash it in as politely as possible. Right the door apologize actor with a cute smile, I guess, is the advice, and take all the people on the journey with you. Don't lead into a level of being egocentric in that way. Think collaboratively, continue to invite people into your world because you will just be a better artist for it. Be radical, live somewhere else that's not expected as an artist, don't go and work in prayer. A Stone's throw from a major gallery, actually just open your own workspace and invite people to your party, I guess is advice I would give myself. What about you, Harry?

- I love that. Thank you very much for that. Advice I would give my younger self, I would say, create and own the narrative of your career and a career takes a long time to build. So sometimes I think you can feel disheartened if things aren't going as fast as you want, but yeah, reputations aren't built overnight and everything you do is laying the foundation for you to be able to move forward and to be the best version of yourself that you can be, as you say create your own opportunities. I always think investing in your own practice and I'm not just talking about financially, but time as well, where I know that that can be difficult at some time when people are earning and having second jobs, but I think definitely scheduling in that time for yourself to work. And even if that is like to read, to be inspired, to go to galleries, to go to shows, I think that that's really important. Know the marketplace, stay ahead of the curve and be iconic. I would definitely, definitely say that. One thing I am absolutely a massive advocate of is, know what makes good documentation because that to me is something that is really important when you're making especially performance, which could be so ephemeral in terms of theatre and installation and live events for yourself, for your memories, for your portfolio, it's really useful to have that documentation to be able to go on with, be hungry, tenacious, ambitious. Don't be a D word and yeah, have fun. I think when people feel you having fun, it's infectious and people wanna get on board with that. So if you just kind of like march to the beat

of your own drum which is like your weirdness and eccentricities are your biggest strengths because they're actually what makes you you in different. And if I go out and love what I'm doing and feel like I'm really connected to it, then that will really resonate with people. And they'll be able to feel that in different way. And I think that that kind of energy is applicable across discipline. So if you're really passionate and excited by this thing that you're doing, even if it's different to what you've done before, but that's just something in wanting to experiment with a certain thing, because it's interesting to you, like follow that, make that yours, and don't accept no like no, you can learn on the job, you can learn doing something. If you wanna make a theatre show, learn how to write one. If you wanna make an installation for the first time, do durational performance to see what it feels like, just do it. I could say, no one's stopping you, but there are these structural barriers, but that's where I think just making your own work and creating opportunities and finding like-minded people that are doing similar things that are not just a community is really important to yeah. Just finding the essence of things that bring you that joy, because this should be like as much as this becomes our job and about money. It's also why we go into it is love and joy. So if you can protect those elements while also turning a buck and making a coin, please do like, and yeah just know that we fully love and support you. And then that's not like a corny way of saying things as well like it is so wonderful and joyful to kind of see and feel and appreciate queer art. I love it.

- And you can't say no to jobs that are offered to you as well. Is within your rights and your power and your skillset to say no to a job. You don't say yes to every paid opportunity 'cause you'll burn yourself out and it might not take you anywhere. It works for the full undermine not work for you in terms of the visibility that that opportunity gives you. And I think that's about health and care as well. Isn't there and safety being radical, but also working with people that help make that safe for you. It's not about just being provocative extrovert without any thought around your own safety, and organizations I think can learn a lot by working with queer community and queer leaders. I think that's something that we can really enhance and add value to, which is few and far between. I think we both have evidence in the area of not seeing many other queer people in significant roles making change. There's not a lot of strategy. There is a need for that. And I think involving people in that conversation is necessary.

- Yeah, very much. And in terms of like waiting for organizations to shift or change the chances are you could be waiting a long, long time. So actually in terms of like collaboration is key, and I think that independent collectives, cooperatives, sharing, learning, and resources, getting together with people who have the similar mindsets of you in the way that their work, even if it is a different sort of discipline, but that multidisciplinary approach of like actually working together and trying to strengthen what it is you do and what other people do I think is really important going forward post lockdowns, we're still not out of the woods by any stretch. So I think that absolutely just getting together and yeah, sharing, how can we help each other and how can we work together? What can I offer that you could use? What can you share that might be useful? And how can we sort of put that together. Also just to pick up on what you just said is that like I do think it's important to learn from your mistakes and learn quickly, but most importantly learn from other people's mistakes. So you don't have to make them on your watch because actually just listen, talk, be a Chatty Cathy and just get as much advice or insight as possible.

- Yeah, but if you're being asked to get your insight and expertise in an organizational setting pay for that time, please.

- Oh, yes.

- We do need paying, we're self-employed people. If you'd like to tick a box as a queer person, fine. We're also ticking a box by working with you, but let's pay each other and find partnerships that are actually economically viable. I think that's fair to say, would you?

- Oh, absolutely. I do agree.

- Pay your queer artists.

- Just pay our artists as well actually.

- Pay artists.

- Yeah, a little bit . Let's go back to what we need to keep ourselves on track here. We need to announce what we're actually working on together and like share the future of what's coming up for everybody and I'll let you announce our news. How about that?

- Oh, well thank you very much. I feel a certain sense of pressure to make sure it's a good announcement.

- So mega excitingly, Abingdon studios and myself, Garth and Harry who are here right now, we applied to heritage lottery funding to create the first formal LGBTQIA heritage archive in Blackpool. And we received the grant, which was just so exciting and overwhelming and encouraging. And we're very, very grateful and very excited to start work on this project where we are going to create and collect oral histories and document queer stories in Blackpool before it's too late, we don't want them to disappear. We want to be able to collect them and capture them and protect them. And as part of what we're going to do with that is create a sound installation at the old electric, which is by the a fabulous new venue in Blackpool, shout out to the old electric and everything they're doing, which is just a really, really, really wonderful thing. Do look them up. But on the 23rd of October, we are creating a sound installation with some of these oral histories that we have captured. And we will also be sort of there talking about the project and throughout as well. There's a survey that we're going to work on to try and identify the needs and wants in terms of heritage of the LGBTQIA population in Blackpool and the surrounding areas to be able to build on this. We are very excited about where we think this project can go and we've received a sort of introductory grant and we're

wanting to definitely build on this because we think that there's so much that can be done in terms of exploring heritage in Blackpool. It's rich and it's exciting. And we're just very grateful and yeah, we can't wait to launch and do this project. Was that good announcement, by the way.

- That was a beautiful announcement. And we've got a sexy new logo, which we're very proud of. Who designed our logo?

- Polari Press thank you very much. Shout out, shout out.

- And then we're offering certain things around training for all histories. Aren't we within the community as well. So that will come on board with how to sustain that archive and consistently available and accessible for people of quality so that you can listen to them properly. I think it's really exciting to look at that as an installation as well in a way that continues our collaborations. Is this our fifth collaboration now?

- Yeah, we've done quite a few haven't way. It's almost like it's own business for who knows what the future brings.

- Wink.

- So yeah and then all the things that are happening in Blackpool and therefore Lancashire. There's the a-n assembly conference, which if anyone doesn't know what that is, a-n the largest UK membership for visual artists, is a national network. It offers conferences in usually four places every year. Obviously there's not been any 'cause of COVID. It's never come to Blackpool having didn't pitch for it and said, let's bring it back by the sea. And we've got bats as well. So we are delivering the first and assembly conference in Blackpool, which will be in late September this year. It's gonna run across two days, which has never done that before. It's gonna have lots of things online as well in terms of the safety for people to be able to access it still in the current climate. So yeah, there's loads of commissions to panel speakers. We're doing research at the moment around a seaside curators an artist network, which is in a current pending funding bit to arts council if you're listening, wink, wink, and we look forward to your decision, but there's something about being able to brand a new network that is focused on artists on the edge of mainstream cultural opportunities and how eyes connect to curators and how artists lead connects to institutions. So that we are looking at real professional development and opportunities for artists as individuals into the way that they are then exhibited, they are documented and they are collected. So this huge kind of undercurrents of research happening at the moment being led by little old us in a place like Blackpool, like, who knew? So I think that's everything that we've got going on. Isn't it?

- Yeah, I can also say if you happen to be around in August on the 8, 15th and 22nd, we will be running out the old electric a sober social Sunday, which is a meetup group for LGBTQ people who

might want to socialize in a sober environment. There isn't necessarily much sober provision in Blackpool for queer people, also around the country as well, actually, to be fair, I often think in terms of sober queer spaces, if you got a bookshop, a clinic, a charity, I can't really think of too many, so more sober queer spaces. And I'd really like to be part of hosting that. So which is why we're posting these events at the old electric, so do come along. I don't know if you've got any sort of personal things you're working on that you want to share, Garth, but hopefully fingers crossed, I also have some pending work that I hope gets some funding around making and devising and building a new show, a follow-up sex education. I would hopefully get that and premiere it in Blackpool at some point next year. So, yeah, I'm excited to sort of be developing a second show now. Yeah, fingers crossed gets some money and we can start working on that.

- And then from my side as a curator at the moment, I'm working in partnership with UK new artists, which is endorsing the base NPO, National Portfolio Organization for any non orgs listening. And that's in partnership with Saatchi Gallery to do the second year in a row of a brand new £10,000 emerging artists art prize, which you know 10 grand for emerging artists within 10 years of their study or non-study is quite a formidable opportunity. That's available online now for applications. And I'm very excited to keep working with them. They're a great organization, and they've really helped me over five years as a queer artist with opportunities in, and outside of Lancashire. We're part of the GUILD program, Abingdon Studios, which is a cohort of 20 art spaces in the UK. And we're the only art space in Lancashire selected for that. And that's where the street art. So shout out to them. I'm part of PIVOT in terms of my own work, which is supported by the Bluecoat and Castlefield Gallery. So if anyone else in Lancashire wants to help me develop exhibitions and showcase that work. That would be lovely. I'm available for touring when we're allowed to. I'm also really good at finding my own funding if other people have matched to help me achieve that. So you give me a little bit and I'll turn it into more.

- And that's the thing too, is did it work? It's like you find a little part and you can turn it into more money to be able to create more opportunities for those which is just something feels really lovely to be in a position to be able to, at this point in a career, to go from those sort of little commissions, little opportunities to them be able to be in that place where you can write an application. It'd be successful fingers crossed for the future ones, but speaking of the others where, yeah, you know that you can get money to others when making your art, when making a project happen, it just it's a very wonderful feeling.

- So I think we need to wrap up. Thanks for listening to the gathering. If you liked the episode, let us know in the reviews and don't forget to share it with your friends networks, show notes, links to all the organizations and initiatives mentioned in this episode and much more head over to www.oflancashire.org.uk/thegathering You can also follow on Twitter @ArtsLancashire to hear when each new episode goes live. A personal thank you to you, Harry Clayton-Wright, thank you so much for your time and voice and passion.

- My pleasure. Thank you very much for asking me to be part of this. It was a real pleasure and joy. I'm very, very thrilled and honoured and love being your friend and collaborator. So thank you very.

- And then a shout out to someone that we love daily, Catlow, who is a queer singer, songwriter, musician from black Blackpool. They did our music for us.

- They did and we love it.

- We absolutely love it. The Coast Is Queer little jingle. Hope you found that cute at the start and the end of this episode.