

# CultureCast: Talk

Rose English discusses 'Plato's Chair'



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'Plato's Chair'

Interview with Sophia Hao  
Laing Art Gallery,  
Newcastle upon Tyne

(Start of episode)

(Short introductory sound effect)

Male voiceover- CultureCast- the podcast from Tyne & Wear Museums.

(End of sound effect)

(Melodic ambient music plays for five seconds)

(Rose English begins talking)

My name is Rose English. The performance was called 'Plato's Chair'. I had been performing Plato's Chair in a number of places...in Canada and also in the UK, and the one at the Laing was the very last manifestation of Plato's Chair, so it was very special from that point of view. And it was at a point where I was also moving into another show called 'The Beloved' and it was sort of on a cusp between the one and the other.

I think I made my first...professional performance in 1973 so I've been working for over 10 years. The title came to me in a dream. And the dream formed part of the performance. And the dream is something I disclosed or told the audience at the very end of the performance after about an hour and a half. And the dream was of a journey I made towards a building that looked like a, like a military hut, a very modest and plain building. And in my dream I broke into this building, which was closed, and at the front of the museum...of the building, was a small notice which said 'museum'...and I broke into it and I made my way through the museum, in my dream, as if I was pulled towards something in the museum. And in my dream I came across this object that I was very drawn to, and it was a chair, a very plain chair. It was a chair a bit like the chair in this picture. And on the chair in my dream there was a small notice and it said 'Plato's Chair'. And in my dream I stole this chair, out of the museum, and I took it home (laughs). And I really loved this dream. It seemed to be communicating something to me that was, on many levels, very exciting to me. And it was a sort of permission to create an arena, however informal that arena was, in a number of spaces, to address myself in public through speaking to a number of questions that were concerning me at that time.

The context for doing Plato's Chair at the Laing started as an invitation from Projects UK. And Projects UK had noticed that there was an exhibition of contemporary art at the Laing called Pandora's Box, and it was an exhibition of feminist art. And Projects UK's John Bewley invited me and another artist who also had the first name 'Rose', Rose Garrard. He wanted to present three artists with the name of Rose – Rose Finn-kelsey, Rose Garrard and Rose English. I don't know if he would consider the same himself with the name John...but (laughs) I thought it was a perfectly ok idea. But one Rose didn't. Rose Finn-kelsey didn't like this idea of just being put together with two other artists because they had the name Rose. But the name Rose is very honourable, after all it is the name that Marcel Duchamp adopted, Rose Sélavy, a rose with two R's, so, you know, I think that playing with the name

Rose is quite acceptable. Anyway, he invited me and he invited Rose Garrard to present a performance in conjunction with that exhibition and I cannot recall if he particularly asked me to present Plato's Chair or to make a performance specially, I don't recall that. But at that time Plato's Chair was a performance that I could take into pretty much any context and make it particularly for that context, and the context of the museum, because of my dream, was very appealing to me. And so I agreed and I was sent various photographs of the building and possible spaces that the performance could be presented and there was some correspondence about that. But it wasn't until I came up to do the performance, on the very day I believe, I'm not sure if I came up the day before or not, that it was very necessary to choose the right space.

I don't recall speaking to any of the other artists, I think I had a brief exchange with Rose Finn-kelsey, not with Rose Garrard, about whether they were going to do it, but since we were going to be doing performances at different times there didn't seem to be very much dialogue about that. The main conversation was with John Bewley, and also with Jane Vickers, who was the director at the time, who sent a lot of photographs of the spaces and made suggestions about which gallery it could be in.

But, you know, part of making Plato's Chair was going...the adventure of just turning up, just turning up and seeing in the moment, what the best solution was at that moment and in that time. And I sort of really enjoyed that at the time, that sort of flexibility, that sort of thinking in the moment, because it contrasted with other work that I had made that was very carefully prepared and very painstakingly prepared and Plato's Chair was made in a very different spirit. So part of it was just the adventure of accidental discovery and being in the moment.

There's the performance and then how the performance was presented and I think that those are two different things in a way because the most important thing was the performance itself and what that was. There wasn't so much a plan as always there were these questions that I was debating in the tradition of philosophy, they discuss questions. All philosophy is based around questions and so that was the conceit or the mechanism for the performance. When I arrived and met John he had, I think, negotiated with the curator of the exhibition Pandora's Box and wanted the performance to be in the same space as that exhibition. But I didn't find the space he was suggesting particularly promising or exciting compared to the galleries of the museum itself and so I suggested that I quickly find another space and I went on sort of a quick journey through the building which, in itself, was like the dream because I was going through a building that was a museum, full of disparate objects from the past, and I came across the gallery that was full of ceramics and glass in glass cabinets and I found that an incredibly exciting and interesting space and I suggested to him that it should be in there and, to his credit, he very quickly made arrangements and got the permissions for it to be relocated there. And so that's where I performed and that's where we set up for the performance. It was a very simple set up. I think that there were very few technical requirements for it. I just had one microphone on a very, very long cable and I think that there was no lighting apart from the lighting that was in the gallery that was very beautiful, the lighting was diffuse lighting from the glass cabinets. And my trunk – a travelling trunk with all the things that I

used in Plato's Chair which were a selection of old theatrical costumes... vintage costumes and various props, like my Mickey Mouse ears and a lace handkerchief, and a pair of castanets, and a dagger and a false beard, and a horse tail and a pair of hooves and a fan. And all these things were there that I would bring out at certain moments in the performance.

Another thing to add perhaps is that each time I made Plato's Chair, I always made something special around that space and so I believe I would have referred a lot to those glass cabinets and the objects in them as objects whose mysterious and palpable presence was informing what I said.

Although, of course, what I said I have no direct recollection of because Plato's Chair was always improvised, each time afresh, so each performance of Plato's Chair was unique to that place, although certain of the questions I addressed in Plato's Chair were constant at each performance.

I think the fact of it being a museum, and it was the first time I had performed Plato's Chair in a museum, I felt it had come full circle from its origin in a strange sort of way, because it had started life as a dream about breaking into a museum, to return the last performance to actually happening in a museum felt right. And sometimes that sort of serendipity is part of ephemeral work.

Sometimes these things that are inferred too, or are dreamt about, or imagined, or discussed, or articulated, or drawn - sometimes they become a reality, I find, and so that was a sort of synchronicity or a sort of 'serendipity' I think is probably the right word, that I really relished, I thought it was exciting. The space itself was extremely exciting to me. It was a long, long, high-ceilinged gallery space, I seem to remember it had a barrelled ceiling. It had an extraordinary stillness and quietness about it, I think because it was full of still, inanimate objects. It was full of this material - ceramic, glass. It had a diffuse, luminous light to it that I found very thrilling.

I remember that I placed myself predominately at one end of the gallery and the people who came to see the performance were sitting facing me on chairs. I placed one chair in front of them, this ubiquitous 'Plato's Chair' that was always just one of the chairs that the building had, so there were many Plato's Chairs. I seem to remember that each member of the audience had a piece of paper, just an A4 sheet of paper with an image on it and the title 'Plato's Chair'. Every person had a different image. One image was of a chair, the next image was of a close-up of a matador and a bull's hooves in a bull-fight. Then there was image I had taken with my arm covered with lots of watches set at different times. There were all these clues about the performance that were completely disparate that they would've had.

I remember enjoying that fact that, mostly when I was speaking, there was a great depth of gallery space behind me. I enjoyed being inside the volume of space. I enjoyed the sort of still smell, the sort of slightly clean polish smell, of maybe the wooden cabinets and maybe the floor, it might have been a wooden floor, it felt held and heightened as a space. It felt contemplative. I liked that too.

Because Plato's Chair was, in a way, about thinking, and was about thinking inside the moment, of speaking and doing, it felt a very conducive space to be making Plato's Chair in compared to some of the other spaces I've made it in (laughs).

I think that, because it was the first time I had performed it in a museum, I felt a great deal of curiosity from the museum staff about my presence, doing this performance, that was really interesting. It felt as if they were intrigued by it. They were also very cooperative and generous. Since it was not something that happened very frequently, performances, they rose to the occasion, I seem to remember, in a very, a very open-minded sort of way actually. So there were no problems about suddenly performing inside this space that was full of quite valuable things, there was no anxiety that I might break them or anything like that, it was just accepted that of course I would not. So that was great actually, and I remember that people themselves, I don't remember particular faces or names, but I remember that there was a quality of attention in that room that was very palpable – the attention that people brought into that room during that performance was palpable, and so it had a palpable atmosphere to be making the performance in.

I was wearing a costume and a lot of the performance was referencing the tradition of theatrical representation as well as all representation because it was addressing the convention of representation in whatever media. And, of course, theatrical costume is just a different form of representation. And I had with me an old Louis Vuitton trunk that I'd found in a skip, it was a very beautiful object, and inside it I had a collection of vintage theatrical costumes that I had bought from a sale probably about 3 years before. There was an old theatrical costumier's in London called Foxes, and they had, they closed down their costume-hire department and they had this big sale, and it was an absolute treasure trove, they had this big warehouse and it was full of these extraordinary old costumes. And I bought quite a selection and they were all opera, ballet, costumes from theatre productions, and a lot of them had the labels of the actors who had worn the costumes. And they were all made of very beautiful fabrics, and they were a combination of Elizabethan, Jacobean, different periods of time. They sort of had an aura about them that I really loved, a sort of dusty, arcane aura of a sort of theatrical history that I found very compelling and wanted to evoke. But apart from that I also had my own costume that I wore which was a sort of very minimal, sort of a black silk shift, like a sort of long petticoat, and I used to wear it maybe just over a singlet or vest, a contemporary garment. And I was usually barefoot or I might have had sandals or trainers on, usually a sort of contemporary pair of shoes of some kind. And then I had a little apron that I would put on that was made of black velvet, that was also from an old costume. It was like a sort of concert artists dress but it was very shabby, it had fallen apart, it was torn. And the apron was like a, sort of like a very practical, it was sort of like a signifier of a practical enquiry (laughs). And then the other objects that I seem to remember often using...I would sort of pull out different things. There was a cape, like an Elizabethan cape. One key object was this lace handkerchief that was almost like an Elizabethan royal handkerchief that was very beautiful, and I used to cry into this handkerchief very loudly during the performance!

The first thing that I used to do, and I'm sure I did it when I did Plato's Chair at the Laing, was I would look at everybody. I would spend some time walking and looking at everybody. And we would just be looking at each other for quite some time. They would be acknowledging my presence and I would be

acknowledging theirs. And that seemed to be a very important part of the beginning of Plato's Chair.

The next thing I used to do was I would heighten the fact that I was breathing and I think I used to, and probably did when I performed at the Laing, then go and pick up a microphone and I would stand or walk in front of the audience, again looking at them, breathing into the microphone for really quite a long time.

I don't know if they did feel uncomfortable but I used to do it because I found it more uncomfortable when I would watch people who were pretending not to see me watching them (laughs). I used to find that more uncomfortable and also I think that I was not uncomfortable with people being uncomfortable about watching what I was doing, that was all part of it. And discomfort is part of watching something sometimes, and sometimes I would pick up on that and ask someone about whether they were feeling uncomfortable.

The thing about Plato's Chair is it did not have a sequential narrative. Nor did it have a set of instructions, like a set of actions that I would repeat each time. It really was a monologue, it really was a soliloquy, and each time what I would say would be different, and the way I would say it would be different. Although I would always talk about the fact that I would not be talking about death, and that the thing that I wanted to talk about was the void, or emptiness itself. And that also I had no interest in anything other, at the time, than in the sublime. And that I also wished to address the topic of the soul. And those were the questions I then attempted to address for the next hour and a half.

With Plato's Chair there wasn't a next that I can recall because every time I did something it was in the moment, of that moment in time. So I would make the decision to do something in that moment, contingent on what was happening at that time, what the nuance of response was from the people... what they were doing, how I thought that they were thinking. I would always of course have things that I'd return to, you know, I would always go to my trunk and get something out, or not, but how exactly I would speak was absolutely made up in the moment. So, in a way, it's a very hard thing to recall, because it was, it was a discourse or a monologue that was improvised in the moment.

I have recordings of Plato's Chair and I've transcribed them, and those give a sort of essence of how I spoke and what I said. But to be able to describe it is difficult. I would need to perhaps read it or play it to you for you to have a sense of what it was. I'm not trying to be difficult but it's very hard to describe what you've said. I did however, I did have a form of structure that I would conjure up, I would draw up the structure from within the performance. And the way I would use the structure is I would request a section of music, I think there were 3 or 4 different short sections of music. And the music was a short...3 or 2 short phrases from the opera Carmen by Bizet. And also there was a short bit of music that I would often play from a TV western called Rawhide, and sometimes I would just ask for that to be played, so there would be a technician who would play that and I would instruct them to do that. I would sometimes also do a short dance sequence, sequences which were also improvised and they made use of ballet movements, and they were sort of referencing ballet and opera as well.

I remember that, of the chairs that were set out, they were all occupied. There might have even have been a few people standing. I mean it wasn't a huge number but it was, I don't know, maybe there was 60, maybe more, I don't know. The space is big but they were all one end so it was just however many people would fit in the width of the space, maybe there were 100. I don't know, maybe less. I don't have a very clear memory.

I don't recall anybody leaving so I think they must have all stayed for the duration of the performance. I believe I would have also have been thinking about what they are thinking, because it was a performance about thinking. It used to take about an hour and a half in total and sometimes I think I used to do it in two parts. I would take a pause or an intermission or an interval. I used to like doing that because during that time I used to reflect quite a bit on the first part of the performance. I used to take that time to digest it and think about it and sort of prepare myself for what I thought I'd like to talk about in the next part.

I don't remember talking to people after the performance, but I know that I would have been talking to people during the performance.

I was very happy that it had concluded its sort of journey inside that very amazing space, that arcane gallery space. It felt right to everything that Plato's Chair was about. There was something about all of those palpable objects in the space that I found very compelling. They seemed to be an echo from the past and the origins of Plato's Chair. And they also seemed to be a premonition of an interest that, actually, I've just returned to recently, which is an interest in objects.

At that time when I was making those very minimal solo performances, they always started life with a set of questions and I would always have like a haiku of questions that were like the essence that I would then digress and speak around, and the questions were the nature of the void, the sublime, the nature of death, you know (laughs), really big questions!

Every time I made that performance it was attempting to answer those questions. And sometimes, while I was performing it, the answers would come to me fleetingly and for a second, and instantly be forgotten. Which is why the performance was made, because the performance answered the questions even if it was for a tiny nanosecond. Which is what thinking is. I think if I was to address those questions again now I would do it very differently. And maybe the thing that I've not mentioned about Plato's Chair is it was funny, it made people laugh a lot, which I used to really enjoy a great deal, because it was something about the pleasure of laughing that is sometimes... accompanies a sort of realisation and I used to really love that. And I also liked to puncture the solemnity that sometimes surrounds those questions, those big questions, the seriousness. And also a sort of seriousness that, at the time, sometimes seemed to surround the idea of live art. There was a certain solemnity or, it took itself quite seriously sometimes and I used to enjoy sometimes just puncturing that pompousness (laughs). It's true that I always used to cry or 'act-cry' and...I would do this quite extensively and very, very loudly, it wasn't discreet or it wasn't demure, it was full-on grief. It was sort of evoking, I guess, all sorts of things at the same time. It was evoking the difference between those sorts of beliefs about catharsis that always surrounds live art. It also was a display of something, of

extreme grief at some close proximity to the audience. I'd usually sit extremely close to them, I mean within inches of them, so also it was referencing those displays of grief that are often given in tragedy, in traditions of tragedy, for instance particularly Greek tragedy, which usually opens at a moment of extreme crisis and grief. I used to just start to do it and then (clicks fingers) I would suddenly stop just like that. It was also then evident that it was just something I was just doing - you had to decide whether it was a skilful display or it was an expression of how I felt about the subject matter I was talking about. Or it was a physiological display of an emotional state therefore a form of representation. Or I just did it because I could do it quite well. Or I thought that it is a very complex thing to experience because usually, if you hear somebody in a state of extreme grief, you are compelled to comfort them, and you are caught in a position of either being reminded of your own grief or feeling uncomfortable because you feel that you should assist the person in a state of extreme grief.

My memory is nobody ever came to comfort me, no, and I can't tell how they all would respond. Some people would talk to me about it afterwards and say that they felt uncomfortable or disturbed or they remembered crying like that. It's also really interesting because there're so many different conventions around a display of emotion, we're very used to hearing people laughing in public, and of course, people were laughing during Plato's Chair. They did, on the whole, laugh. Not necessarily everybody, but people did laugh quite loudly and quite long. And that's a very acceptable emotion to express in public but extreme grief usually is a very private thing so that's why I also like to place it in a very public situation. For instant, in a gallery, people will spend a long time looking at something, a painting, or sometimes they will smile or something, but people don't usually cry profusely in front of a work of art. They might be moved to a tear but you don't usually see people prostrate with grief in front of a work of art, but perhaps that is an appropriate response to some works of art or to some realities, maybe the tragedy of representation demands a display of extreme grief.

Quite definitely it produced a tremendous impact. Plato's Chair and the performance immediately before it, three years before...the very first improvised solo performance I made was called Adventure or Revenge. And both those performances were incredibly exhilarating to perform because it was very clear to me that I'd arrived at a place where the performance itself was the thinking, it was both the question and the answer, and it was *the thing* (laughs), the thing itself. And everything I'd perhaps made before that, it had not been. It had been work that was premeditated carefully, carefully constructed, structured. But Plato's Chair and Adventure or Revenge were a moment where it felt that there was...I was just literally dealing with an essence. It sort of felt like a very...a very important work that then it sort of... it generated a lot of other work that's taken a very different form and a very different direction. But it's about...something about the thinking that happens in time and place in a performance that I've returned to again and again. And I took forward, from Plato's Chair, always this intention of the work answering a question, an internal question, that was sometimes stated in the work and the work itself was attempting to provide the answer.

The terms I've used about my practice have changed over the years contingent on the sort of practice that I was doing at the time. These days I say that I'm an artist. Around about the time of Plato's Chair or...yes...I think that performance artist was something I was sort of comfortable with but like all categories slightly irritated by as well. And maybe afterwards I used to call myself a performer – I would say 'I am a performer, I make shows'. I like the word show because...the word 'show' is both in theatre and in art – you mount a show, you put a show on, you curate a show and you also can make a show in the theatre, you can put a show on. It's a very old word and it works for both. And also people know on the whole what the word 'show' means. They didn't so much know what you meant when you said 'I'm a performance artist' or 'I make performance'. That would sometimes conjure up an impression of what that was that I found quite limiting. So I used to like the word 'show', but these days I like the word 'artist'.

I just remembered something that was an important part of Plato's Chair which was connected to the breathing. There was something very palpable about being with the audience, being in the space, being in front of them in this very old relationship of being a performer in front of an audience – just being a human being in front of others. It's to do with presence, and what that communicates - a presence, your presence, what that communicates. There was a whole...there used to be a whole section where I used to have a sort of monologue about being alive, being alive, 'I am alive' I'd say at some length. And it was sort of...yeah, it was a sort of riff about being alive (laughs).

My early performance works were always around the objects that I made to then be either worn or used during the performances, that was the origin of the work, and I would make objects in porcelain or in horse hooves or in horsehair, and that was my way. And then as I started to make work other things became more important to me. But I've also enjoyed very much working with people that I've sometimes commissioned things for like a pair of immense eyelashes or a glass wand, so there've always been iconic objects in the performances but I haven't necessarily made them myself.

I think that there's, in recent years, the thing that's been a very important thing is almost like a visual score that I'll make of the work. The work I've made in recent years has been perhaps a larger scale, has involved more complex combinations of things. And there's sort of...I have a great interest in the separation between the image and the word, and so these days I like to work with a sort of visual score that also evokes the words.

I think I first used the beard in the performance before Plato's Chair called Adventure or Revenge. And in that performance I had a persona who was a patrician, a patriarchal persona. I used to wear this costume which is called a doublet and hoes, it's sort of an Elizabethan costume, like a sort of classical, Shakespearean actor of a very old sort. And this was again an old costume and I would adopt...I found that when I first started to speak in performance I could only whisper or adopt a man's voice. And if I did either of those two things I could speak well but, if I tried to speak just in my own voice, I couldn't necessarily speak. But if I adopted this very manly, slightly patrician, slightly false...not false, but slightly arcane, almost like an idea of a Shakespearean actor's voice or an old kind, I could speak, I could be quite ironic, I could be quite...I could play with language in a way that I found very invigorating and

very exciting actually, because it seemed to be quite dangerous, it seemed to make people laugh and that persona was really, really exciting to get inside. So yes, it felt like a sort of appropriation of a mechanic of power and sort of putting that on and seeing how in was and finding that it was really great actually.

One of the very first reasons why I wanted to start to make performance was it circumvented; it went around the whole problematic of the status of objects which I found really disturbing as a young artist. I found the way the things I made were mediated in the world very, very, very problematic. That they had this status of works of art. And I found that actually making these objects to then be placed inside an ephemeral work but had no life outside of the moment of it happening a really, really, really exciting way of circumventing that problematic status, a work of art. So when you ask me which one is the work of art, it also a very complex question to answer. But I would say that, I think the fragments or things that both precede the performance, come before it, things that remain afterwards are all really important fragments of that piece of work, yes, they're potent fragments.

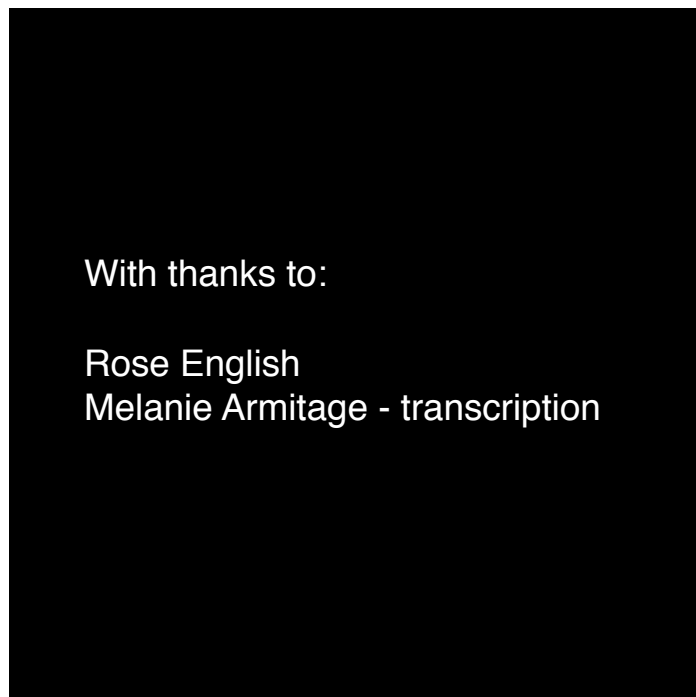
The way I understand it, I mean I suppose first of all I would comment on... yes I think it's true that there were artists who believed that the work should not be documented but, you know what, I've yet to meet one of those artists. Perhaps it's apocryphal, this story. Who are these artists who never have their work documented? Who are they, where are they? We've always heard about this but I've just for the first time asked this question, Who were they? Who are they? And there's also the opposite is true. There were and are numbers of artists who only make live work in private who send... documented and the document then becomes the record of the live event. There are many artists who do that, who don't necessarily present the work in public. It might be something that is a walk and it's then documented. It might not have been witnessed by somebody else other than the camera. There's work that looks great in documentation but perhaps was not very interesting at the time, in real time, and then there's work that was marvellous, really thrilling in real time of which there is very little or very poor or very dull documentation. So it is, of course, a very subjective thing, documentation.

In relation to my own documentation, I find it important... I find it important to have those palpable traces of my practice. They are important to me, yes. I think like everything, it's how it's mediated and presented, those fragments or evidence of the ephemeral practice, I think it can, like everything, seem incredibly dull and dead or very vibrant and thrilling and of the moment as well. I think it's how it's presented or how it's viewed or how it's seen or where it's placed... how it's accessed, you know. But I think it's always had an uncomfortable status, live art or performance art, it has always had an uncomfortable and ambiguous status inside the wider conventions of the art world, yes, I don't know really why that is but I certainly know that, in relation to my own practice, observing and noticing that as a result of being an artist who *had* performed in galleries. You know, I presented a performance with Jackie Lancing and Sally Potter when I was 26 in the museum of modern art. It was not unknown, you know, to also work in mainstream gallery spaces at the time. But I observed that those invitations to do that came very, very rarely so, if I wished to maintain my practice, as a strategy I had to

acknowledge that there were other places to do it. And one place I decided to do it was in theatre spaces where there is a convention of doing something every night. So just as a practical strategy of survival it seemed like a really good idea.

I think it was the extraordinary thing of the impetus for the original idea of making Plato's Chair being a dream about a museum full of objects then returning for the final performance into a museum full of objects. And it was something about actually being there in the space, with those objects, inside a building that called itself a museum that was very thrilling.

(End of Rose English talking)



(Melodic ambient music plays for five seconds)

(Short sound effect)

Male voiceover- CultureCast- the podcast from Tyne & Wear Museums.

(End of sound effect)

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