­­Transcription of Interview

# Participant A (interviewee) and Sarah Schäfer (interviewer)

Date: 6 November 2017

Venue: Gardens, Cape Town

Duration: 00:27:32

**Sarah:** Okay, yay! Thank you.

**Participant A:** Oh, pleasure.

**Sarah:** I have a list of questions, but they’re really open-ended, so…

**Participant A:** Okay.

**Sarah:** ...it’s going to be very, very broad.

**Participant A:** Cool.

**Sarah:** So, before we go into the site, your background with the Owl House. If you have had any experience with it, will you explain it and describe it?

**Participant A:** Sure, so I…I’ve been to the Owl House once, almost exactly two years ago. And it was…I went to the Owl House within my first week in South Africa, so I had very little context for South Africa, let alone the Owl House. And ja, we were…myself and my boyfriend were driving to the Eastern Cape, when we stopped in Nieu Bethesda for a night, on the way there, in order to see the Owl House. And ja, so spent probably about twenty-four hours in Nieu Bethesda and obviously went to see it.

**Sarah:** And what were your perceptions of it?

**Participant A:** I think I was a little bit unnerved by it. I...again, like I had very little context for who this woman was, and I found a lot of the statues like, a little bit frightening and kind of seemed to be somewhat indicative of like, a little bit of a frightening mental health state. (laughs) And I think I had heard things about her that weren’t true, before I went.

**Sarah:** Okay.

**Participant A:** Like for example, that she like locked up her father and things like that. And like then I kind of subsequently found out that it was advised that her father have his own space, basically, not that he was locked up. And yeah, I think I was also quite…a little bit like perturbed by the whole Nieu Bethesda set-up. I think again, being quite new to South Africa, it was quite strange to me, to have like a town that was so white with such a huge township outside.

**Sarah:** Yeah, ja.

**Participant A:** And just that kind of very like oldie worldie, super, super isolated like…­yeah, like I think it was just not like anything I’d ever experienced before.

**Sarah:** It must have been such a shock to the system.

**Participant A:** Yeah. (laughter)

**Sarah:** I can’t imagine what that must have been like.

**Participant A:** I mean, David, my boyfriend, kind of subsequently, he was like, I don’t know if it was the best idea to take you there on your first week. But yeah, so I think it was just very...yeah, I mean I think like, it obviously just seemed like such a lonely existence at the time, let alone now, when we have like kind of modern transport. And so that was kind of very...yeah, I mean, I think I was mostly intrigued by what it said about her as a person, I guess.

**Sarah:** Ja.

**Participant A:** And also it was quite difficult, I found, to really understand what was going on. I mean, again, it was my first time in South Africa, so everything was a bit of a whirlwind anyway, but I was...it was fascinating, but I wasn’t too sure like...maybe in some ways, like how it compared to other people who lived at that time, I guess, do you know.

**Sarah:** Ja. No, that does make sense, ja. Okay, so after looking at The Long Bedroom Collection, how...have your views changed? And if so, how?

**Participant A:** Yes. Yeah, definitely. I think just the attention to detail in...on the website was really fascinating. I mean, I kind of vaguely remember seeing those things, but kind of I guess brushed them away as kind of, junk that had kind of been left. I hadn’t realised how much of the things in the room came from abroad. Like what I was really struck, was by the oil lamp that was made in Hong Kong.

**Sarah:** Yeah.

**Participant A:** Like because I’ve lived for quite a while in China, and so I was like...I mean, it’s just like, how did that...you know, at that time, how did that end up there. And just also quite intrigued by, I guess, the relationship between the two sisters.

**Sarah:** Mm.

**Participant A:** And how one could end up basically, like an unmarried kind of like recluse, in some senses, and how others...and how her other sister could end up travelling the world and had a daughter, or whatever.

**Sarah:** Absolutely.

**Participant A:** So just...as I say...and then also I was...it was quite nice, something that kind of like, I guess, challenged my previous assumptions, was her relationship with the boys who would bring her glass bottles...with the children who’d bring her glass bottles. And how maybe she was an oddity, and not necessarily such a recluse, as I had thought. And that yeah, like obviously when I went to the Owl House it was in the...during the day, and so to me, the Owl House felt quite dark...

**Sarah:** Yeah.

**Participant A:** ..because you go out of the sunshine into these quite dark rooms, but actually it must have been amazing at night, do you know, when she put on lights.

**Sarah:** Yeah. I think from...I mean, there are no photos or videos obviously, but she would open it up to the public...well to her friends.

**Participant A:** Yes.

**Sarah:** And often people would come and visit her from...you know, from across the country and they’d come with gifts from other countries, and then she would create a really special night for them.

**Participant A:** Yeah.

**Sarah:** And she would do it on a full moon.

**Participant A:** Wow!

**Sarah:** She would light all of her candles and lamps.

**Participant A:** Yeah.

**Sarah:** And her mirrors are all set up so they reflect light from different rooms. So she would create this like...and it sounds amazing.

**Participant A:** Wow! Yeah.

**Sarah:** I mean...and I’m sure it’s...it would have been very different to how it is now, you know, there was...she took such pride in all of her stuff and it would have all been clean and polished, and it would have, you know, it would have been a very magical, sparkly..

**Participant A:** Yeah. And certainly like, what it said there, which was that like actually the walls are quite dusty now, and so we don’t...they don’t glimmer like they would have. And I was like, okay yeah, because I just remember being like woah, like why would you want shards of glass on your walls..

**Sarah:** Ja.

**Participant A:** ..that’s like...awful. But actually like, on reflection, it would have been lovely if it was clean and like there were lights shining.

**Sarah:** Ja.

**Participant A:** So I think yeah, definitely challenging my ideas of like, her as a recluse.

**Sarah:** Okay, great.

**Participant A:** What she thought she was doing with the space. It wasn’t just these like mad images from a mad woman. She had like a plan. (laughter)

**Sarah:** She did have a plan. So based on the website, if the opportunity presented itself, would you go back to the Owl House?

**Participant A:** Yeah. I’m trying to think...I think, I mean, I think I would be much more...I don’t think I would go back for myself, but I think I would be much more likely to take a friend there. And I mean, that would definitely be something that I would show a friend, before they went to the Owl House.

**Sarah:** Why is that?

**Participant A:** I think that...I mean, I think like, the more you know about these kind of objects, the richer the experience feels. And certainly like, I went in knowing nothing, and struggled to find really, any interesting information about it. So...so yeah, I think it definitely paints it in a much...in a much better light. Whether I would go again...hmp! It’s a long way away. (laughter)

**Sarah:** It’s a very long way away.

**Participant A:** If it was in Cape Town I would go again.

**Sarah:** Okay, ja, definitely. Okay, so now...so you mentioned, if...you would maybe take a friend there.

**Participant A:** Yeah.

**Sarah:** What would you tell the friend before you went? How would you explain what they were about to see?

**Participant A:** I think I would tell them that it’s like a very...a very, very small town and really like quite remote. And that..

**Sarah:** I’m going to interrupt you quickly. I think it’s really interesting how you don’t refer to the Owl House, without referring to Nieu Bethesda.

**Participant A:** Yes.

**Sarah:** And you can elaborate on that if you want to, because it is site specific.

**Participant A:** It’s very specific. I mean, I think like, if the Owl House was in the centre of Cape Town, I would have a very different understanding of what it is. But I think that the...I mean, I think that there’s maybe, you know, maybe I’m being unfair, but it seems like there’s something a little bit like...a little bit desperate about the Owl House. Do you know, like this kind of attempt...as it said in the [..] like, this attempt to make life less grey. Do you know, it was kind of...it feels in some ways like it’s a really amazing response to quite an isolating life, and potentially quite a lonely life, to kind of create something that would attract people to come to this like remote town. So yeah, I mean, I really...I...whereas, I think if it was in the centre of Cape Town, like actually, there’s a place kind of similar...like a collection similar in the centre of London, but it’s kind of...it’s by a like wealthy socialite, do you know, who collected these kind of objects.

**Sarah:** Yeah.

**Participant A:** And to me then, that’s a very...that’s a very different dynamic between the artist and the museum, or whatever. So yeah, and I think I would tell them...I think definitely I would describe a bit of her kind of life history and...and then definitely talk about her relationship with her sister, and how...and her relationship with her father, and how she kind of collected, or kind of created this space...I don’t know, maybe to attract people, or to brighten up her life. And that...I think I would also talk about how like, it’s an interesting glimpse into kind of...the kind of objects that would be...would have just been around at that time. I mean, I was just really interested in like the shoes and the...the like little biscuit tin box with the sewing, and the shirt and the kind of...the picture of the clothes in the cupboard. It was like, oh cool, like...yeah, it was just...it was very interesting to kind of be taken back in history. I mean, I think any house that had been completely preserved from like the 1960s it would be an interesting house to wonder around.

**Sarah:** Absolutely.

**Participant A:** So that...I think that’s how I would kind of present it to them.

**Sarah:** After looking at the website, are you more inspired to learn more about...are you inspired to learn more about Helen Martins or outsider art.

**Participant A:** Yes, very much. I don’t know what outsider art is.

**Sarah:** Ja.

**Participant A:** I mean, they kind of give a brief description, but I don’t really understand. I think...I mean, I know very little about South African art, generally, and I think I know quite little about that demographic in South Africa at that time. So yeah, I mean, I think that’s very...I think that’s really fascinating. I guess being an anthropologist, maybe those kind of like social dynamics definitely...definitely appeal. Yeah, I mean, I think that the website kind of...there are many questions, I guess, that they didn’t answer, that I would be interested to know about.

**Sarah:** That’s great. You’re answering very nicely.

**Participant A:** Oh, cool.

**Sarah:** If this website was publicly available, would you recommend it to others?

**Participant A:** Yeah, to others who were going to the Owl House, for sure.

**Sarah:** Okay.

**Participant A:** But also as a like...it’s very...the pictures are very beautiful, the photographs are very beautiful.

**Sarah:** That’s great, thank you. And if...let’s say there was another inaccessible collection, as inaccessible and isolated as the Owl House..

**Participant A:** Ja.

**Sarah:** ..if visiting them digitally...visiting them online, was a possibility, would you do it? Would you seek them out...what...do you think that you would seek them out and look at them?

**Participant A:** I think that I would, in preparation for going to visit them. I don’t know if I would...I don’t think I would like, if I had no intention of going to visit them. I mean, unless...because like this was very much about like, those specific objects. I mean, maybe if it had more like historical context, or information about the outsider artist, or whatever, like if it had more kind of information like that, I might be interested, but...yeah, otherwise, not unless I was planning to visit. It’s in preparation for enhancing the experience.

**Sarah:** Ja. No, that’s great. And if, for example, on the site, there were links through to other similar collections..

**Participant A:** Hm. (interested tone)

**Sarah:** ..would you be...would that provoke you to...to click through to them?

**Participant A:** Yes, definitely. Yeah, absolutely. I mean, just to see like you know, if there was...if we were like...I don’t know like...driving to Paternoster or whatever, like is there anything on the way which might be worth stopping off and seeing, like in a sense. Yeah, like just to kind of get a sense of where interesting things are in South Africa, that we might be passing.

**Sarah:** Nice. Okay, and in terms of the actual digital artefacts, do you feel that they detracted or enhanced their tangible counterparts? Or did they detract from their real life versions?

**Participant A:** No.

**Sarah:** ..or did they enhance..

**Participant A:** I mean, definitely enhanced. But I mean, maybe that’s just...I mean, I’m always the person that goes to an art gallery and like, doesn’t look at the painting, and just reads the thing. (laughter) Like, that’s...maybe that’s who I am, is like, things don’t...I think things don’t make that much sense to me unless I have some kind of information behind them. So yeah, I mean, as I said, I definitely...I definitely feel like it’s...I mean, the amazing thing about the lamp, for example, is that it’s from Hong Kong. Like to me, that’s what’s really amazing about it. Or the amazing thing about the nudes, is that they’re potentially her sister. Otherwise, they’re just nudes, and you’re really not sure like...I’ve no sense of what their value is, or whether...you know...So yeah, I mean, I think...I mean, maybe I’m just less of a sensory person in that sense. Like I went and I was like, this is room full of junk. But actually, reading what I know now, it’s like, okay cool, like I understand a little bit more about why this is special.

**Sarah:** That’s great. So I mean, this is...this question leads on directly. Do you think collections like this should be digitised, even though we’re taking them out of their very immersive context?

**Participant A:** Mm.

**Sarah:** Digitising them like you’ve just explained, could give another level of information. So do you think that it’s valuable for them to be digitised?

**Participant A:** Yes. No, definitely. I mean, I think...I mean, for example, what would have been super valuable, is if I’d had that on my phone as I was there, you know, so that you’re...because you don’t necessarily want like plaques besides the nudes, explaining what it is, but to...

**Sarah:** Imagine having another whole set of little signs next to all the little objects, and..

**Participant A:** No, I mean, you don’t want that, but like if it was like...if it was on your phone and you could kind of browse it in real time, but also read that information, like that would be super, super valuable. I mean, I think...I mean I...being an academic again, I think that everything should be kind of curated and digitalised and information should be presented to people. But it’s...I guess maybe the question is like, why? And...as well as just kind of for posterity’s sake, kind of documenting and documenting it so beautifully. I think it’s...yeah, I mean, I guess it, to me, it so much enhances your experience, to have information at hand like that.

**Sarah:** Fantastic. How would you improve the digital platform? Do you feel that there were any omissions, or any things done incorrectly, or..? Ja.

**Participant A:** I think like, I would have been interested for it to go much deeper. I think I would have enjoyed much more information about her as a person, much more contextual information about what Nieu Bethesda was like at that time. There’s kind of like correspondence from Gra...that you...site?

**Sarah:** Graaff, yeah?

**Participant A:** And it’s not clear to me who that is.

**Sarah:** Okay cool.

**Participant A:** And yeah, I mean, I would have...I would have really appreciated more information about her sister and her sister’s travels, and the relationship between them. Yeah, I mean, I think like...and maybe like more information about...yeah, the outsider artist...just how this fits into South African art, generally, or...like I’ve never seen anything like this, you know, so...I mean it’s...yeah, so it’s kind of like, why is this important to South African identity, I guess. Because it feels very important to South African identity, like South Africans really rave about this.

**Sarah:** Yeah, it’s such a like...outsider art, even by it’s...by being called...it’s as if, you know, no outsider artist goes out to be an outsider artist.

**Participant A:** Yes.

**Sarah:** They’re kind of bunched in this group because they don’t fit in anywhere.

**Participant A:** Yes.

**Sarah:** Like they’re...philosophically like, people write about outsider artists as being acultural.

**Participant A:** Right.

**Sarah:** And then by even calling them acultural, you’re trying to call them something which they, by their very nature, are not.

**Participant A:** Yeah.

**Sarah:** So it like, it’s a tricky..

**Participant A:** Yeah.

**Sarah:** ..philosophical thing, and they never try to fit into the art world.

**Participant A:** Yes, yes.

**Sarah:** And the ones that do, they get rejected by the outsider art world.

**Participant A:** Right.

**Sarah:** And then...you know, so it’s a really tricky..

**Participant A:** Yeah. Yeah, definitely.

**Sarah:** ..but I know exactly what you mean. But I think what you’re saying, is so great, because it’s that, what makes it so interesting, is the context.

**Participant A:** Yeah, definitely. And I mean, I think also, like the...yeah as I say, like the kind of contemporary context. Like...so ja, like I arrived in South Africa to visit my boyfriend and like, one of the first places that he took me to, was the Owl House, which he visited like as a child. So he didn’t have a very clear memory of what it was about. But it’s like, why the fuck are you bringing me? Like, do you know...I mean, it was really cool, and it was on our way to the Eastern Cape you know, so it was like...but it was also really interesting to me, that like, he was quite excited about seeing it again. And like I guess as a non-South African, I’m kind of curious as to like what this means to South Africa. I mean, I guess she was Afrikaans, it’s like a super Afrikaans town, so like...and there’s obviously like, there’s a lot of like Biblical references, I remember, from the statues and like, kind of..

**Sarah:** Yeah, and I think she was fascinated by spirituality of all kinds.

**Participant A:** Yes.

**Sarah:** Like she was actually kind of rejected by her church.

**Participant A:** Right.

**Sarah:** Because she was...you know, she loved the Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám, and she loved all those Eastern mythologies.

**Participant A:** Right.

**Sarah:** And she was just fascinated in everything that was a bit exotic.

**Participant A:** Yes, yes exactly. And yeah, that seems to kind of...I don’t know, that kind of seems to be something that South Africans kind of...I’m curious as to...as to this like, kind of...I don’t know, like kind of desperate housewife almost, kind of trapped in this tiny town. It was like vicariously living through her sister’s travels or whatever, do you know. But it says something interesting I think, about like South African identity that this is something that’s like celebrated.

**Sarah:** That’s really fascinating. That’s really...it’s so interesting hearing from a foreigners point of view. Was there a particular artefact that interested you?

**Participant A:** Yes. Well I was...I mean, I think I was...so the shoes really fascinated me. I think maybe because it was...there was a lot of like information about how the shoes related to her, like that story about getting her toes accidentally amputated, which was like bizarre. But like, yeah, just how...I think it interested me because it’s such a personal item, and they’re just so beautiful, like they’re really...yeah, like they’re really...I don’t know, maybe I’m kind of interested in kind of, fabrics and fashion generally, but it’s just...they were really strikingly beautiful and not out of place today, and - in some ways - and so yeah, and I was just very intrigued that...I think the reason I liked the shirt and the shoes was because, presumably, like they were not things that she simply collected, because they were her art, they were also like things that she had around her, and that she may have worn. And so then, it’s kind of in some ways, it’s less of a museum about her art, and more of a museum about her, do you know? Like we’re interested in the things that she had around her, rather than just the things that she made, do you know. Like...I don’t know, like say I have these pieces of art or whatever in my room, which will only be hung up on the wall, but I don’t expect like my dresses to be included among those pieces of art, if I was to die and somebody was to turn this into a museum. But this museum has kind of turned those very personal artefacts into pieces of interest. So yeah, I mean, it’s kind of again like, maybe also as an anthropologist, more than an art critic, I just...anything that helped to build a sense of who this woman was, was very interesting to me.

**Sarah:** Nice, nice. And final question, which you have partly answered, how satisfactory was this browsing experience, as opposed to a real life experience?

**Participant A:** Hmm. That’s a hard question. I mean, I guess I just see them as two completely different things. I mean, as a browsing experience, I found it very satisfactory. I particularly liked the long shot of the room where…you could click on the objects. I really enjoyed that, I felt that was really cool. I mean, I think I probably engaged with it very differently since I’d already been there, and... it’s difficult to answer. I mean, I don’t see, for my purposes anyway, I don’t necessarily see the two as being separable.

**Sarah:** That’s very fair.

**Participant A:** Okay.

**Sarah:** No, that makes perfect sense.

**Participant A:** But I mean, I can imagine, for example, somebody who is interested in like South African art or whatever, like..

**Sarah:** Ja.

**Participant A:** ..I mean, that might have been to them...they might have a very different answer.

**Sarah:** No, that makes perfect sense, and it reminds me of a question that I should have asked right at the beginning.

**Participant A:** Ja, sure.

**Sarah:** That in terms of yourself as an art viewer, or an art consumer, where...how would you explain your interest in art, art history, your museum going habits?

**Participant A:** Yoh! That’s a hard question. I’m trying to think if I’ve been to any other art exhibitions in South Africa. So I wouldn’t say that I’m somebody who goes out of my way to view galleries, but I mean, I..

**Sarah:** Include museums in this…

**Participant A:** Museums? I’m trying to think. I’d say...I mean, yeah, I think I probably go to museums, much more than art galleries, and I think, as I said before, I am kind of somebody who’s much more interested in like the personal...the kind of personal stories behind things, the kind of cultural influences, or who these kind of individuals were. So I mean, I think I...when I visit...yeah, I mean, when I visit art galleries, I’d say, or museums, in countries, I guess I take a little bit of a meta perspective, and I’m interested in how this country presents itself. Which is probably not surprising considering I’m doing a PhD on, you know, how South Africans present their own history. (laughter) That’s quite fitting.

**Sarah:** It’s very fitting.

**Participant A:** But like...yeah, as I said like, I lived in China for a long time, I love Chinese art and I think what really interests me about, for example, learning about Chinese art, it’s kind of...I mean, there’s a lot of...philosophy is a bit of a grand word, but there’s a lot of kind of ideas about reality, that feed into Chinese art, which I find very interesting, do you know. How that...how like the use of space of whatever, the absence of anything, kind of feeds into Chinese thinking, compared to like Western art, where like the entire canvas is filled. So yeah, I mean, I think it’s those kind of things that really interest me. And then like, in South Africa, mm, you know, part of my PhD is looking at how, for example, like the District Six Museum represents apartheid, and represents District Six. And almost...that’s...yeah, that, I’d say that’s more interesting to me, than learning about what happened in District Six.

**Sarah:** Ja.

**Participant A:** So yeah, I mean...and I guess in that sense like...I mean, I enjoy modern art galleries, but I mean, just a kind of a...sensory experience, but they don’t stick with me in the same way that kind of other things do.

**Sarah:** That makes sense.

**Participant A:** Okay cool.

**Sarah:** I’m stopping.

**Participant A:** Cool.