THIS WAS
TOMORROW

OLI SWORD

Artist and resident at Trevone

In conversation with Enrico Policardo
Trevone Quarry, Cornwall
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Edited from the recorded conversation.

01 Who are you, where are we, and how did you get here?

I'm Oli Sword. We're at Trevone Quarry, sitting outside the kitchen. I got here through word of mouth, and by chance and luck really, which is quite nice. I moved down from Scotland to study fine art, and I was lodging in a spare room in a family house. My landlady knew Rob and Sophie and told me about this place, and two friends who lived just down the track told me about it too. So I came up and just fell in love with it. That was just over a year ago, and it's changed a lot since then.

More people have come and gone - the community's grown, which is nice. When I started I had no electricity or water, on a different pitch, in a caravan. Then my brother came down from Scotland to visit, literally the day after I moved in, and I said, bring your work boots. We ran the water and electricity cable through the gorse bush to this site, and I moved up here a couple of days after he left.

02 How would you describe the place to someone who has no idea?

I've heard it described as an anarchist utopia, which I quite like - for an outsider, I think that's fairly accurate. For me it's about reusing materials and the creativity that comes from that, and being able to create and sustain yourself in harmony with nature rather than working against it. Using reclaimed and natural materials as far as possible, and being submerged in a pretty wild place. It's ex-industrial, with the quarry, but nature's taking it back.

03 You're studying fine art?

I did the foundation, then my first year. I've deferred this year, because I'm not sure I'm going back - it wasn't quite the direction I was looking for. Being up here, so inspired by the people around me and the landscape and what everyone's up to, is pushing me in a different direction from the education system, which I was struggling with anyway. I'm not very academic.

I thought university would be an energetic space, with lots of ideas bouncing around and people who were ambitious and determined. There are people like that. But it surprised me how many seem to be there just to get a degree. I've got more inspiration from being up here among creative people. And it felt detached: our artwork was never graded, but our writing was, and I'm not there to be a writer. People tell me academia needs people like me, and I appreciate that - it's flattering. It might be that I go back. But I need some time away. Going into the university I lose the drive I've got outside it. There are so many hoops to jump through. It's like: you're here to create amazing things and build your career - and we're going to distract you as much as we can and make it quite inconvenient to be ambitious. There was a bit of head-butting between me and the uni.

04 What is this place allowing you to do?

To just get on with stuff - play around, learn through my hands, experiment. And to have a good network around me. I hate doing electrics, but we managed it, because there are people here you can ask: could you give me a hand with that? In its own right it's an informal education system. You come in without the practical skills, and you leave knowing all the little components that make up the luxuries we take for granted.

As someone trying to pursue an artistic career, with the cost of everything today, it's very hard without financial backing. Here there's so much freedom, and you're encouraged to get on with it. That can be scary, but it's also big

momentum. Everyday hassles make you think, how could I make this better? And I get a lot of inspiration from nature - being this submerged in nature, with all these aggressive, industrial, rusty objects scattered around. It's a fusion of two very different worlds that I really love, and they work really well together.

05 How did you come to fine art?

All through high school I struggled with academia as well. I was interested in engineering and science, but I couldn't quite get it down on paper and I wasn't great with exams. I hit a bit of a rut, and I ended up staying in the art department the whole of my last year at school. It was really inspiring. […] Exploring my creativity and what interests me through visual art and sensory things - that's what inspired me.

Then I worked in demolition for a year, which I really loved. Probably my favourite job to this day. Seeing all these splintering beams and shattered tiles taken out of houses and thinking, how could this be given another life? That's probably what brought me here. At one point I nearly went for an apprenticeship or a trade instead. But between university and building practical skills up here - welding, wood carving in the workshops - it's changed direction, in a good way. I'm still interested in skill and trade.

06 What do you think art is?

A translation of the creator's emotional state, or expressing their concerns, or highlighting issues they're passionate about. In the last century the conceptual side has come in a lot, and there's a big pressure on conceptual art - but you can literally do anything, which is really interesting. There are things I wouldn't have thought of as art, or as protest. If you think about anything

long enough, you can build a narrative for it. And being inspired by lots of different practices gives you momentum to find what interests you and translate it to other people.

07 What's your thing?

Making big forms. I've been doing a lot of wood carving and metalwork. Going forward I like the playfulness and naivety of felt work, which can be quite surreal. I have all these ideas for bike sculptures - a world without cars, or without horses - making really bizarre things into a bike, and maybe a film about it. My thing is exploring my ideas and making them into something 3D, or performative, or both.

08 Do you think you're off-grid?

I don't really know. We're on mains electricity, though some people are getting solar. The water comes from the land, and some food in the summer. But I don't think there's anyone here who doesn't go to the supermarket or pay an electricity bill. And Rob, who runs Trevone and owns it, is so politically engaged and so driven to make a change for good, which is really inspiring. People could come up here and think it's a little bubble paradise where nobody's in touch with the outside world. But we're all quite engaged with it still.

09 What would you tell someone who wants to live like this?

I'd ask them why. And I'd prepare them. I'm always making my life slightly more inconvenient for some reason - my process is a very weird squiggly line that eventually makes its way to the target. It's a journey, and if it's not right for you, it's not right for you, and you'll go back to normal living conditions - four walls and a roof that already exist. In cities it feels like there are people all around you, but maybe not the community there is here. Though I haven't

lived in a city - I've lived in towns and villages my whole life. I'm from the Scottish Borders, just south of Edinburgh. […] Wandering off and exploring the hills has really inspired me.

So: I'd ask them why. And I'd say it's a bit of a kick in the teeth when it's not bright and sunny when you wake up - the reality can be a punch. But you've got to keep moving. The benefits completely outweigh the inconveniences.

10 Do you think the two extremes - normal living and places like this - could meet in the middle?

There's a lot of sense in that. As costs keep rising, the system needs to allow for it. For me it's partly a kickback against how expensive everything is. But it's also just exercising freedom.

I really want to sustain myself more so I don't rely on convenience as much. Even going to the shop from up here is inconvenient - I try to go every two weeks, and somehow I'm there twice a week. You have to plan ahead. […]

11 Is this the future you were dreaming of?

I think so. It's only been a year, but honestly, I completely think it is. The DIY side of everything is huge fuel and momentum, and really inspiring. I don't think I could go back to living in a conventional way after being exposed to this. I don't think I'll be here forever, but at the moment I can't see myself moving back into a house any time soon.

12 What makes you happy?

The freedom to explore and create. It has its ups and downs, especially getting so invested in something. But that, and being able to go and submerge yourself in nature - in the ecosystem we're part of and have become so detached from. Reminding myself that I'm part of this beautiful symphony of

living organisms makes me very content. I'm quite happy being content. I find things in day-to-day life that really excite me, and I love that feeling. But happiness comes in waves. Feeling settled and content - not knowing what's going to happen in the next three months, but figuring it out as you go and exploring. Without sounding too much like a hippie.

13 What are you on to next?

I'm heading up to Scotland today - halfway, anyway. I'm setting up a sculpture at a festival on the west coast, a big estate with temperate rainforest. I need to reconnect with the Scottish hills. That's one thing I miss a lot - it's quite flat down here, and a bit tropical, I struggle with the heat. Then I'll come back in a month and build a workshop, and get back into practical work. I've just quit my job behind the bar. It was really fun, all my friends hang out there, but it's an intense environment and the late nights didn't really work for me.

14 Anything you'd like to tell the nation?

Through convenience and capitalism there's a lot of exploitation of people and the environment across the world, and we're quite detached from it. I'm still feeding the problem - buying fuel, going to the supermarket. It's very hard to live completely apart from that, because it's how this country has been so successful, and how the world works, in a very unfair way. I think it's important to acknowledge the harm that's been done for our convenience as a nation. By acknowledging it, you've recognised the problem, and then you can slowly find ways to reduce your part in it. It's a small difference, but a difference is still a difference.

I get really quite angry that as a country we're still causing so much harm to so many people and ecosystems. It's not individual people, it's the country. It's unsustainable and unethical. And there's massive pressure on you to

recycle, to use public transport - when trains cost a fortune in this country. It's easy for organisations making huge profits from exploiting people to give you all this convenience and then say, you need to stop relying on it, but we're going to keep providing it.

Even affecting one person, making them rethink how they consume, reconnecting them with the fact that things come from somewhere - there's a whole journey from origin to your hands, and quite often it's unsustainable, harmful and exploitative. It gets you really down when you start researching it, and it's really hard to take yourself out of the equation. But even small steps, fighting back a little, asking questions - you're making a difference, and making other people think too.

15 Like a compost toilet - you live with your own waste instead of flushing it away.

Exactly. And it's completely regenerative. In a couple of years that's soil. Good soil. That would be our food. Human tampering with systems really affects the balance - like removing an apex predator disrupts a whole ecosystem. I grew up with dogs and I really miss having dogs around, but they're not allowed on site, and I completely respect that, because the comfort of having a dog would be damaging this beautiful place.

More than just looking for another way of life, I think it's a protest against how wasteful and damaging everything is, for the sake of convenience. And I'm still not perfect. I don't buy loads of things, but somehow I collect a lot of mass - it'll be used for something, it's part of how I create, and it's all reclaimed. One, because I can't afford new things. But also: what's the point in getting new things when there's a brilliant sink right next to a skip?

From the moment you're born you're in the cycle of convenience, and moving away from it is a process that takes time, because the whole of society revolves around it. Sometimes I'd love to go back to the naivety of, oh yeah, let's have this, without knowing where it comes from. But that's not sustainable. It's really important to think about where things come from: I really like this - but how is it affecting other people?

I make sculptures under the name Wysax.

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