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g Tessa Mullen

## “WE SAY YES TO ARTISTS”: AN INTERVIEW WITH THE CO-DIRECTORS OF HARTSLANE

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Tessa Mullen sits down with directors of hARTslane, Cristiana Bottigella and Sigrún Sverrisdóttir for an interview about the gallery’s beginnings, its “say yes” ethos, and its vision of art as a communal and civic space.



hARTslane from the inside, described as having ‘a raw architectural quality and a warm, organic character.’

Photo by Sigrún Sverrisdóttir.

**Tessa Mullen:** How did hARTslane begin?

**hARTslane:** We stumbled across this space. There were three of us at the start, all women working in or around the arts — one was an artist, another came from spatial design, and the third from arts management. We all lived locally, just five minutes away. Initially, one of us was simply looking for a workspace for drawings and planning applications for neighbours. But when we entered the building, it was clear the space had much more potential. Very quickly it became about more than our own work. We began organising exhibitions, inviting more people in, and from there it grew into something more communal.

**TM:** What was your original vision for the space?

**hARTslane:** At first, we called it hARTslane Studios, thinking it would be a multidisciplinary studio. But the space itself dictated otherwise. It was raw and unpretentious, and that encouraged experimentation. From the beginning, we decided not to curate in a top-down way. We distrusted the established paradigms about what galleries should look like, how they should work, and who should be exhibited. Instead, we embraced the idea of an open, artist-driven gallery where artists shape the space — where they come to work, experiment and exhibit without the usual gatekeeping. Letting go of a fixed roadmap became our strength: we stayed permeable to our context.

**TM:** Was affordability a conscious part of the model from the start?

**hARTslane:** Absolutely. It began at £10 a day — just enough to cover paint, the website and maintenance. We wanted to remain accessible, especially to students. The demand was huge from the outset. Even today, we don't advertise because we've always feared instability with the lease. Yet the space has been in constant use for over a decade, which shows how desperately affordable art space is needed in London.

**TM:** How do you maintain fairness in access?

**hARTslane:** That's where our "say yes to artists" policy comes in. We don't ask for CVs or references. We say yes to everyone. Commercial artists usually self-select out; the space attracts those who understand its ethos. It's not about profit, but about presence. We encourage group shows over solo ones, and we ask artists to connect their projects to something meaningful — contemporary issues, shared experiences, or social engagement. Fundamentally, it's about co-equal relationships and mutual exchange. Visitors become participants.

**TM:** Has that lack of gatekeeping ever backfired?

**hARTslane:** Never. In 13 years, not once. No one has trashed the space, overstayed, or done less than they promised. Artists are professionals. It's odd how the wider art world sometimes forgets that. We believe artists are the experts, and we're here to serve them — not to vet or control them. That trust has never been misplaced.

**TM:** How do students engage with the space?

**hARTslane:** Goldsmiths and Camberwell are just around the corner, and hARTslane is even listed in some of their course handbooks. Students can't afford to pay £800–900 to exhibit elsewhere. Here, we charge realistically. Their work is refreshing, and we get a front-row seat on what's coming next. Supporting the next generation of underrepresented artists is central to our ethos: it stimulates exceptional work and kindles future generations in turn.

**TM:** And what about the internal structure of hARTslane?

**hARTslane:** We don't have a board. We have conversations. We get the same salary and make decisions together. Artists approach us with ideas and we do our best to accommodate them. There's no hierarchy. It's horizontal, intentional, and it works.

**TM:** You've described hARTslane as an "island of slow experience". What does that mean in practice?

**hARTslane:** It means stepping away from urgency, speed and output. So many art spaces are driven by programming calendars and deadlines. For us, the relief of limitations makes room for process. Some artists only show for three days, but they spend time here beforehand, experimenting and getting to know the space. That's why people say the space feels alive — it's not about spectacle, it's about presence. The raw walls and limited resources encourage inventiveness, and artists often tell us: "Don't change it! Don't let it become a white cube."

**TM:** You've also said hARTslane isn't a traditional gallery. How would you define what it is?

**hARTslane:** We think of hARTslane as a platform, not a product. It is a civic space as much as an art space. We provide structure but not prescription. It's responsive: where we speak from shapes what we do. Sometimes it's an exhibition, sometimes it's a meeting place, sometimes it's just a place to be. We like that fluidity. It makes us more permeable to context, to change and to the community we're in.

**TM:** Do you produce your own projects as well as hosting others?

**hARTslane:** Yes. About half of what we do is providing the space to artists, and the other half is self-initiated. One of our earliest projects was Greetings from New Cross Gate, funded by the Lottery. We invited residents to submit images and vote on ten new postcards of the area. More than a hundred people contributed — from children to professional artists — and the public voted for their favourites. That participatory spirit set the tone for everything we've done since.

During the pandemic, we created The Bunting of Hope with local families. People made flags out of old bedding and clothes in workshops in local parks. They cut letters into fabric to make words, which were then hung in the parks for everyone to see. We've also worked with the Migration Museum and the Refugee Council on workshops with more than 100 immigrants who had newly arrived in Lewisham.

**TM:** What motivates that kind of community engagement?

**hARTslane:** We believe imagination is the energiser of society. Our goal is to support as much community vibrancy as possible. We see the gallery as part of the social fabric, not separated from it — a civic sanctuary as much as an art space. Art contributes to well-being, imagination, and connection. It shouldn't be rare to walk down the street and meet someone local who knows your gallery. When that happens, that's when we'll know we've really succeeded.

**TM:** What do you wish more galleries would learn from hARTslane?

**hARTslane:** Trust artists more. Say yes more often. Let go of control. Create structures that serve people, not prestige. Put local people on your boards. Become part of your community rather than staying aloof from it.

**TM:** Thank you.

**hARTslane:** Thank you.

