



# Co-Authoring Cultures

# **Co-Authoring Cultures**

**OPEN  
EYE  
GALLERY**

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# HOW DO WE CO-AUTHOR CULTURE ?

By Liz Wewiora  
Head of Social Practice, Open Eye Gallery

This was the question Open Eye Gallery and project partners across the community, health, care, justice, youth and educational sectors set out to explore. With the support of the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and the Young At Art initiative (Celebrating Age funding from Baring Foundation and Arts Council England), our Co-Authored Cultures Programme ran from Spring 2019 to November 2022, inclusive of an extension of engagement due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The programme was designed to support the gallery in embedding a socially engaged model of working, which would see the organisation co-author everything it does in partnership with local and national communities and partners. The gallery acknowledges that both the terms 'socially engaged' and 'co-authored' come with multiple meanings and interpretations, but as an approach to practice which is constantly challenging its own definition, this put us in an exciting position to explore it through live action-based research and collaboration.

We aimed to explore this approach through four key aims, which were adapted and refined in the first year of the programme, based on discussion and peer review from our partners, local artists and community members.

The aims set out the ambition that the programme would explore socially engaged practice through the delivery of projects, and also carry out strategic activity to embed, promote and build networks to support the long-term development of this work.

The project aims were:

**Aim 1.** For participants: we aim to create greater access to relevant, high-quality collaborative arts; we aim to create increased agency, confidence and creative development; better awareness of and access to local cultural resources.

**Aim 2.** For our partners (community and cross sector, e.g. health, criminal justice): greater access to and understanding of benefits of quality arts interventions; for the partners in the arts sector: improved networking, access to the evidence base, understanding of the value of Socially Engaged Photography Practice (SEPP).

**Aim 3.** For our organisation and our artists: we aim to improve skills in and understanding of co-authored practice (for both organisation and artists); improve evidence, partnerships, relevance and sustainability; and position Open Eye Gallery as the national lead for SEPP.

**Aim 4.** For all: we aim to create projects and approaches to practice which leave legacy and sustainable models for communities and individuals to continue in an engagement and co-creation of high quality arts.

Our infographic (see pages 8-17) lays out our 'deliverables' including how many projects were undertaken and how many people were engaged. This forward, however, focuses on the impact and learning from the three and a half year programme.

Overall, Co-Authoring Cultures projects had a highly positive experience for many participants, with a wide range of creative, social and wellbeing-related benefits. These consisted of and were summarised by our external evaluator Kate Rodenhurst as *'enjoying new experiences; enhanced creativity; improved wellbeing; development of confidence; support and friendship; and longer-term commitment to newly formed photography groups'*.

Commissioning partners had also benefited from working with the gallery through long-term projects which offered something different to service users and maintained that commitment over a longer time frame. Partner organisations had developed skills; raised their profile and reached new audiences; been able to produce higher quality projects as a result of Open Eye Gallery's involvement; and were committed to continuing the provision of socially engaged photography as part of their offer to service users.

At the heart of our commissions sat our artists, who benefited substantially from their work with the gallery, but similarly offered us great insights and feedback into the practicalities and challenges that can come with socially engaged projects.

Artists suggested that the programme *'increased practical experience in socially engaged practice resulting from provision of training and the potential to move on from training to commissioned work; enhanced understanding of ethical considerations in socially engaged practice; increased participation in networking with other photographers; and higher personal profiles resulting from the exhibition of their work'*. (Kate Rodenhurst, 2022)

The project was found to have led to substantial changes in the gallery's staffing and business model. There is now an expectation that all of the gallery's work will be co-commissioned, co-created, co-funded and co-programmed. Staff feel more knowledgeable, trained and confident in taking this approach.

- The gallery strengthened the relationships with existing partners and developed new ones.
- The programme attracted new audiences to the gallery.

- The gallery has a pool of skilled and experienced socially engaged photographers to draw on for future projects.

- Open Eye Gallery's growing reputation for the quality of support and mentoring is attracting good artists who want to work with them.

- The responsive programme (see page 50 for details) has been a mechanism to change practice across the whole gallery team.

- Staff have been encouraged to innovate and there is a spirit of experimentation and openness at the gallery.

Strategically, Open Eye Gallery is now much more prominently placed nationally as a leader in socially engaged photography practice. This includes national recognition from funders, and the gallery has recently been awarded a continuation of its Arts Council England NPO status for a further three years, based on a continuation of its socially engaged work. With successes however, come key learning and considerations for future programming. Embedding socially engaged photography practice long term is in itself challenging, when some funding models don't necessarily model the length of this type of work.

The gallery has identified a need to build in capacity and resources, which gives artists and groups time for legacy work and exit strategies to ensure projects don't feel cut short, both practically and emotionally for all involved. Finally, it was acknowledged that whilst the profile of this practice is becoming more widely discussed, there is still much work to do to fully stamp its mark on the map of the cultural sector's approach to commissioning.

This publication is just one attempt to help celebrate and profile the impact of socially engaged and co-authored practice. It contains an infographic of key quotes and stats about the programme and a series of case studies about each strand of our programme, including guest essays and a poem by one of our project participants Jane, who we also dedicate this publication to, alongside all those who collaborated with us on this work.

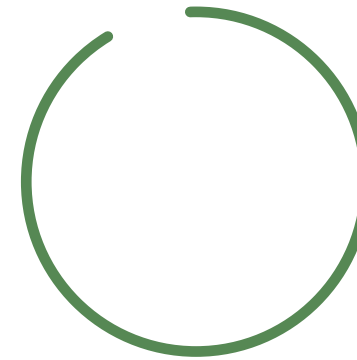
# Impact on Artists

“I’ve learnt new ways of thinking around Socially Engaged Photography, new contacts, new ideas and approaches, time and space to develop and test ideas without worrying about it going wrong, a chance to present my work for the first time, ongoing support and a feeling of being part of the Open Eye Gallery ‘team’ of artists”



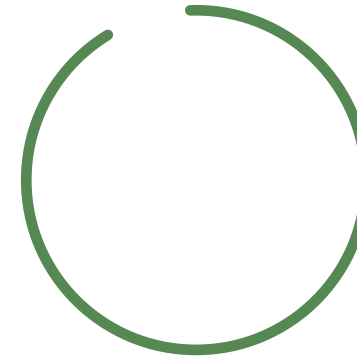
**25%**

of artists stated that their approach to socially engaged practice has developed to a **large extent** since taking part in the commission



**91%**

of commissioned artists stated that the project supported progression routes or assisted them to professionalise their practice.



**91%**

of artists feel part of a larger creative community of socially engaged practice as a result of taking part in the programme to some or a considerable extent.



**66%**

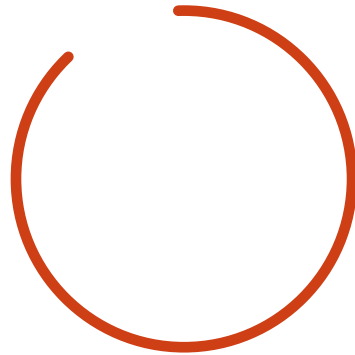
of artists agreed that their practice had developed to some extent.



# Impact on Partners

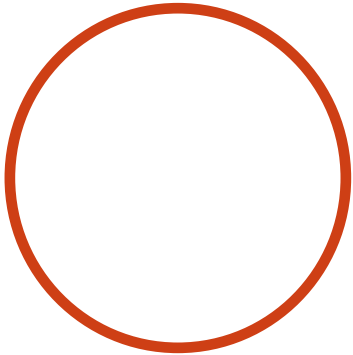
**88%**

strongly agreed that they would recommend working with Open Eye Gallery to others



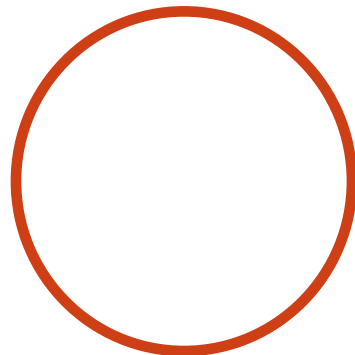
**100%**

strongly agreed they would work with Open Eye Gallery again in the future



**100%**

of responsive programme partners strongly agreed that working with Open Eye Gallery was a positive experience



# Impact on Participants

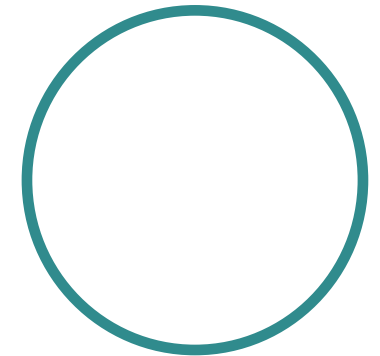
**70%**

of participants reflected they felt empowered or more confident as a result of having their work shown in a professional exhibition



**100%**

of participants reflected they felt more confident and creative in using photography



**“Through photography, I think we’ve been able to talk to each other on a deeper level and the friendships have bonded because you bring them things out in your pictures that you might not say in words, you know quite intimate things or ‘this happened to me or that happened to me’.”**

# Who did we collaborate with?

Participants ranged from 14 – 86 years old in our main SEPP commissions



**48%**

of participants identified 'learning new skills' as a major factor in taking part in a SEPP project



**43%**

of participants identified as women, **40%** as men, **15%** identified as non-binary and **2%** preferred not to say



**82%**

of participants identified as living in lower socio-economical areas



**62%**

of participants identified wellbeing being one of the major factors of taking part in a SEPP project with us



**68%**

of participants identified doing something more social in their community as a major factor in taking part in a SEPP project



# Outputs

**17**

in-depth and long term socially engaged projects engaging with

**286**

participants, who then co-delivered a series of wider participatory events reaching

**1634**

participants across their local areas.

**22**

artists (photographers, writers and designers) were commissioned to deliver and showcase major SEPP projects with an additional

**14**

artists / graduates being offered micro-commissions

Two Crossing Sectors training and development programmes completed by

**26**

artists

**139**

responsive programme opportunities reaching

**272,179**

audience members and engaging with

**3855**

participants.

**13**

public showcases for socially engaged photography projects (SEPP) reaching

**40,132**

audience members at three on-site main gallery exhibitions and

**54,410**

audience members across city-region wide off-site audience members.

The programme reached a further

**8369**

online audience members which actively engaged in digital publications, online events, instagram showcase takeovers and VR exhibitions.

Clickmoor is a local photography club initiated through MyClubmoor, a local community and Open Eye Gallery in 2019.

# CLICKMOOR



The North Liverpool-based photography collective have been working with artists Emma Case and Katherine Monaghan for the past four years. Over this time, they have developed their practical photography skills and have used the medium as a way to explore ideas around identity, wellbeing and place.

This has included a local exhibition at MyClubmoor to share their initial work as well as producing an online and print lockdown zine which brought together images and activities the group worked on remotely over the Covid-19 pandemic.

They've since gone on to have their work featured in our Collective Matters exhibition (see page 42 for more details) and have taken part in a series of online events and public workshops profiling their work to the wider public.

As part of Open Eye Gallery's LOOK Lab programme earlier this year (which explores climate change ideas), the group were invited to develop their own work in response. The group spent the past five months focusing on areas of climate and sustainability which relate to them personally and within their immediate community.

Themes which emerged included:

- **Imbalance (exploring the imbalance between natural growth and manufacturing growth);**
- **The impact of rising sea levels;**
- **The importance of our personal green spaces being habitable for bees;**
- **Ice caps melting (global warming is an immediate threat, and we need to act now).**

Alongside work produced by each member of the collective, Clickmoor came together with young participants from the 'Through our Lens' project in late July to discuss climate change and wider conversations about what we want our future to look like. 'Through Our Lens' is a participatory project with young people and photographer Carolyn Mendelsohn, who, like Clickmoor, made the majority of their earlier photographic work during and in response to the Covid-19 lockdown.

This work was presented as a public realm exhibition on the exterior walls of My Clubmoor and the railings of Larkhill Estate Gardens.

The group now exist as a self-running photography collective and have just embarked on a new 'street photography for wellbeing' project with one of the gallery's MA students on the joint Socially Engaged Photography course with the University of Salford. So watch out for new work from the group coming out soon!

Since 2017, photographer Stephanie Wynne has been collaborating on art projects with the Wirral Women group.

# STEPHANIE WYNNE

In 2018 the women came together to mark and celebrate the centenary of the crucial point in British history when some women achieved the vote. They researched and discussed historical and contemporary issues that impact upon women, such as education, health and employment. From this dialogue, Stephanie and the women interpreted through photographs some of the critical personal moments of change in each of the women's lives – to mirror that pivotal national moment on November 21, 1918.

The work resulted in six very different responses to the concept of Transformative Moments. Stephanie, after extensive discourse

and collaboration with the group, produced an exhibition as a reaction to their testimonies and to reflect each woman's individuality. The work was showcased at Williamson Art Gallery and as part of a group showcase promoting women 'Mentors in the Arts' at Tate Exchange, Liverpool. The photographs provided a small glimpse into the lives of these women and how they have dealt with life altering events, made decisions for change or placed themselves within the context of equality. Their life experiences bear witness to their tenacity, positivity and good humour. In 2020, Stephanie continued to work with the group, but through the restrictions of the lockdown pandemic.



# AND WOMEN FROM WIRRAL CHANGE



She took images that the group had garnered remotely from their extended friends and family around the globe and produced a jigsaw reflecting the activities of 'passing the time' that many of us undertook in lockdown. With the prospect of a second lockdown, the Wirral Women Group turned locally to their homes, families and immediate surroundings, taking the concept of 'Haven', a place of safety, and examining those places that sustain us and the places we return to.

The photographs produced are mostly taken on smartphones and were presented in drawers from a chest; these are precious and private articles being kept safe. For the last two years so much of our interaction has been through screens, and these pictures have been created as 3D montages to move past looking at the world in two dimensions. Both 'Haven' and the jigsaw piece were both presented as part of the Collective Matters exhibition at Open Eye Gallery in 2021.



**“The thing I've enjoyed most is being let loose with the camera and with no boundaries, you know, nobody saying “oh, that's ridiculous”. It was always encouraged and it was always built on for the next time I went in to work on something, and I've created some good work, I've got to be honest.”**

**— Project participant**

Artist Suzanne St Clare, Glow Creative Learning and Creative Youth Development (Wirral Council) have been working in collaboration with Open Eye Gallery for three years, exploring ideas of identity, what it means to be a young person in the UK today, love and mutual respect for oneself, each other and our planet.

# GLOW + SUZANNE ST CLARE



Projects have included 'A Portrait Of...' which saw the group take over our archive to curate one of our main gallery exhibitions exploring identity through portraiture and another project devising and delivering the public programme at TATE Exchange, exploring the hopes, fears and aspirations of young people.



**“Working in partnership with Open Eye Gallery has been an extremely positive experience for our group and the projects have introduced these young women to many varied opportunities they would not have been able to access.**

**We have witnessed an impressive commitment, specifically the Mutual Respect Manifesto that took place through 2020, which had a particularly positive impact on the group, increasing self-esteem and confidence at a difficult time.**

**The group are now at an age where they are applying to higher education and jobs, and they have been able to talk about their creative experiences with Open Eye Gallery, at interviews and on their CVs.”**

**— Project Artist**



In 2021, the group then began a new project responding to the idea of love through a set of provocations:

- What does it mean to love and respect yourself and how can we support notions and understandings of self-care?
- How do we evolve into the person we want to be through finding the love within us that motivates and inspires?
- How can we ensure short-term and long-term love and care for the world around us, to ensure our planet is protected?

The work produced reflects a contemporary and personal view of what it means to love in society today and is formed from a series of video interviews and public programmes with photographers Sarah Lee and Marketa Luskacova, known as the ‘Big Love Hot Seat’, a series of campaign posters which were displayed in the public realm, our Gallery 2 window space, and a project zine. The group collaborated with a host of additional artists to produce the work including Tasha Whittle, Ivy Kalungi and Fauziya Johnson (from Root-Ed Zine).



# JUST BETWEEN FRIENDS

Just Between Friends was a project developed and produced with a community group in Castlefields, Runcorn, alongside Robert Parkinson and Gary Bratchford.

Robert and Gary worked with a variety of groups within the Runcorn area over the past 6 years, but Paul Hamlyn's funding ensured the artists could deliver an in-depth, collaborative project with a group of men in the Castlefields estates for over 3 years. This included also being able to invite filmmaker Adam Mead to collaborate on the projects.

The project covered a wide range of mediums that principally revolved around using lens-based media to evidence and explore the spaces and relationships formed through the project. In addition, walking, note making, cooking, eating and sharing conversations were as important a method as photo making. The work produced highlighted the importance of community driven practice as a process and not just a final outcome.



Just Between Friends culminated in an exhibition split between two sites, firstly, four public realm installations in Runcorn with an accompanying map zine designed by Amrit Randhawa. Secondly, an exhibition at Open Eye Gallery, Liverpool, that showcases some of the processes and activities that contributed to the project over a 3-year period, and a film piece produced in collaboration with Adam Mead.

The purpose of parallel exhibitions, one in situ and one within the gallery, was threefold. Firstly, to encourage the exploration of Runcorn, to invite participants to see and experience the environment and people who make this project what it is. Secondly, to allow for the possibility of exchange between site and gallery

and to better reconcile the relationship between community and institution, city and suburb.

Lastly, to better understand the hows and whys, successes and failures that shape how projects, such as Just Between Friends, come into being.

While the exhibition marked the end of their formal relationship with the group, it also signaled the start of something new. Members of the group have independently developed the framework for their own, constituted photo-based community group based at the CHI Community Cafe, Castlefields.

We're honoured to introduce Phoenix Amateur Photography Group (PAP)  
***For enquiries please email  
pheonixap21@gmail.com***





**“Being creative is hard sometimes because of the way people react to what you're doing. So you know, some people look at it as a “why are you doing photography?” You know, go out and do something different. I think that’s breaking down that barrier for us, it is an important thing. The whole process has been enlightening, from start to finish, the amount of people involved, the amount of effort that they do to put them all together, and it's a big thanks to Open Eye Gallery for allowing us to get this space now to actually have a good time as well.”**

**— Project participant**

Project  
partnership:

# LIVERPOOL DEMENTIA NETWORK GROUPS +

Open Eye Gallery and Mersey Care NHS Foundation Trust in association with Liverpool SURF and other Dementia Network groups across the city region came together to work with photographer Tahdg Devlin over the course of two years to explore a visual narrative of someone living with dementia.

As the group could at first only meet remotely and online with Open Eye Gallery staff and Tahdg, the focus of their initial collaboration aimed to reach out to people across the country who might be facing similar circumstances over this time.

The group reached out to people across the country living with dementia, inviting them to take part in 'Dementia Eye: A View to Remember'. This was an opportunity for people living with dementia to share photographs of their 'view' over the past 12 months whilst we had all been in lockdown. Images sent in were then shared on our Openstories platform, social media and Digital Window Gallery.

One of the main topics which came through the images sent in was around the importance of feeling connected in difficult times.



# MERSEY CARE NHS FOUNDATION TRUST WITH PHOTOGRAPHER TADHG DEVLIN



Tadhg Devlin continued to work in collaboration with the group, to develop a new project Across the Kitchen Table (Who is the Community?). Within society there is often a negative assumption that dementia is only associated with loss. The conversations and images captured in this new work challenge this belief and demonstrate the importance of maintaining existing relationships, and developing new ones, following a diagnosis of dementia.

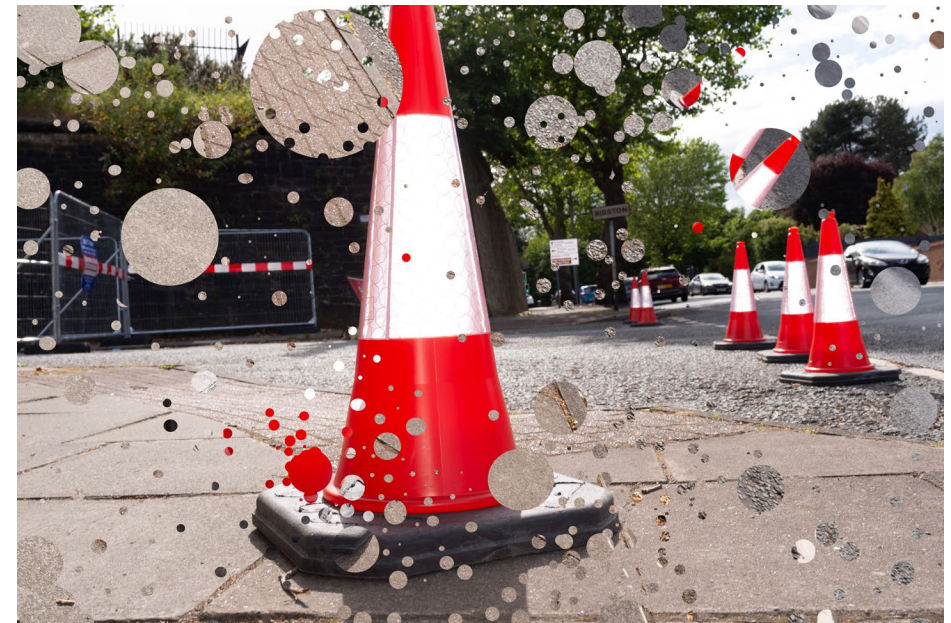
The participants in this work spoke passionately about the importance of meeting others in the same position as themselves, their peers, and the transformational impact this could have on quality of life.

They highlighted the many benefits of coming together to offer insight, share experiences, perspectives and

the difficulties of some of the issues around dementia. Without these experiences, often in groups, many of these individuals would be isolated in their experience of living with the disease. Throughout the country, support offered post-diagnosis varies greatly with many areas offering very little support whatsoever.

By discussing the positives of coming together and forming strong, supportive relationships, the group hopes to raise awareness and to initiate conversations in other parts of the country to form similar groups, make connections and to offer support for those who can often be overlooked.

An activity booklet has also been co-produced with designer Amrit Randhawa, that is hoped to help others in the future and to show the power of bringing people together.



**“Thank you for this beautiful piece on the reality of caring for someone with dementia. My gran is living with dementia and your guide gave me hope for the future.”**

**— Audience member**

# BOUND/ FRAYED

Bound/Frayed reflects a year-long project between Tadhg Devlin and a number of staff and people supported by the social care charity, Community Integrated Care.

Together, they have been co-authoring images which represent the experience of working in the care sector in some of the most challenging moments, whilst also celebrating the everyday work to support people who access social care, which is often hidden from the public.

## TADHG DEVLIN



The work started with Zoom calls during lockdown, which led to most of the images being created outdoors whilst many of the restrictions were still in place. The portraits presented in Gallery 1 and outside on our gallery walls reflected some of the most difficult moments for those working within the industry during the pandemic. They simultaneously shine a light on the resilience and dedication to personal care

Tadhg Devlin now continues to work with Community Integrated Care and Open Eye Gallery to collaborate with staff and people supported by the charity nationally. We have ambitions to showcase this new work through exhibitions and in print.

## AND COMMUNITY INTEGRATED CARE

**“Photography is a social opportunity but it’s also a way of putting a lens on the care sector. Someone is looking at your world with fresh eyes.”**

**— Commissioning partner**



**Project  
partnership:**

Throughout 2022, Open Eye Gallery worked with long-standing collaborators New Beginnings youth group, The Atkinson (Southport) and two new artists in residence, Ocean Farini and Sally Gilford on *Protest of Identity*. Together they worked to produce their own series of fashion items which culminated in a public exhibition in Autumn 2022, at The Atkinson.

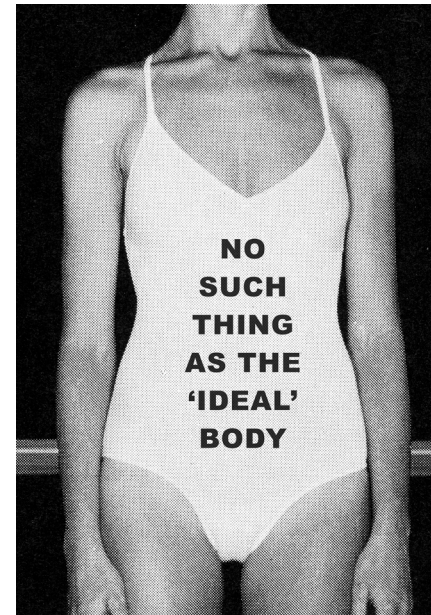
# NEW BEGINNINGS YOUTH GROUP, SPACE, AND THE ATKINSON

**“Working with the team at Open Eye Gallery on several co-commissioned socially engaged youth photography projects has been a wonderful learning experience for all our staff who have grown in confidence understanding the topics and issues raised and how to communicate, not only with the groups themselves but when sharing the outcomes with our visitors.”**

**— Commissioning partner**

# WITH ARTISTS OCEAN FARINI

# + SALLY GILFORD



For this project, a group of young people called New Beginnings who are from in and around Bootle, came together to talk and create in a space they knew well. Originally formed before the start of the Covid outbreak, the New Beginnings youth group decided to focus on a previous exhibition at The Atkinson, *Westwood*, as the starting point to explore the role of fashion and photography in society today.

The exhibition celebrated the design work of Vivienne Westwood, one of the last independent global fashion companies in the world. Westwood continued to capture the imagination and raise awareness of environmental and human rights issues through her work. *Protest of identity* is all about exploring the potential of the politics of textiles and clothes, how we can use them as tools for expression and change, as well as questioning when these things blur the lines between fashion, sculpture, and political statement. What is possible when we use them as a medium for our own private protests for things that matter to us? Open Eye Gallery continues to work with the group and The Atkinson, with a recent visit to explore the current exhibition, the *‘Unselfish Selfie’*, which will form the next starting point for their own new creative work.

Project  
partnership:

# NOVUS, HMP RISLEY WITH ARTIST HAFSAH NAIB



## Hafsah Naib and learners from HMP Risley

The collaboration with learners at HMP Risley actually began back in spring 2020, with a pilot project set to work around the additional limitation of the Covid-19 pandemic. The project was adapted to offer learners the opportunity to engage through individual postal pack

resources and activities, all of which needed to work just within the prison cell setting.

Hafsah designed thoughtful and individually tailored and creative resources which enabled the men to explore cameraless photographic techniques including collage and cyanotype processes as well as drawing and writing.

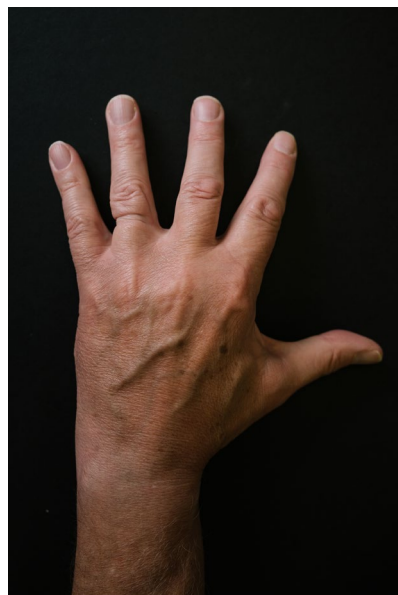


# HMP THORN CROSS WITH PHOTOGRAPHER SIMON BRAY

**Restricted Views – Creative Outlooks**  
was a programme of work reflecting long term photographic collaborations between artists Simon Bray, Hafsah Naib and learners from HMP Thorn Cross and HMP Risley.

Combining the skills of socially engaged photographers with the life experiences of both learners within prison settings and their families, the programme explored how photography and creativity can be used as a tool for self-expression, to enhance family relationships, as well as learning new skills to aid rehabilitation.

Simon Bray began working with learners from HMP Thorn Cross to explore what role photographers and photography plays in society today, and what visual stories they as individuals might want to tell.



The learners played with ideas of photo-elicitation and visual metaphors photographing objects and spaces around them and engaging with personal family images. They also tried out studio based and portraiture work as part of a gallery visit to Open Eye Gallery.

Each learner went on to curate their own selection of final images to be shared within the exhibition. Collectively the images produced show a journey for each learner, not only in the development of their technical photographic skills, but also in their ability to find and shape meaning in imagery to tell poetic stories. Their work reflects issues of the past with aspirations of the future.



# WE ARE KIRKBY

We are Kirkby brought together two distinct but interlinked collaborative projects by photographic artist Tony Mallon, filmmaker and visual anthropologist Jemma O'Brien, the Northwood Golden Years Group and service users and staff from Kirkby Resource Centre.



Photographer Tony Mallon has worked with local residents from the Northwood Golden Years group since 2016, developing collaborative projects, which explore the past, present and potential future of people and places that make up this local area. For We are Kirkby, Tony and the group began collaborating with filmmaker Jemma O'Brien. The project looked to represent the current hustle and bustle of the town market, with the group co-authoring the ideas and co-producing the photographs throughout the process. Whilst the works the groups produced celebrated the current community who support their local high street, the work also reflects the ever-shifting landscape of Kirkby town centre.



**“It is what gets me up on a Friday morning, knowing I can go see my friends and my photography club.”**



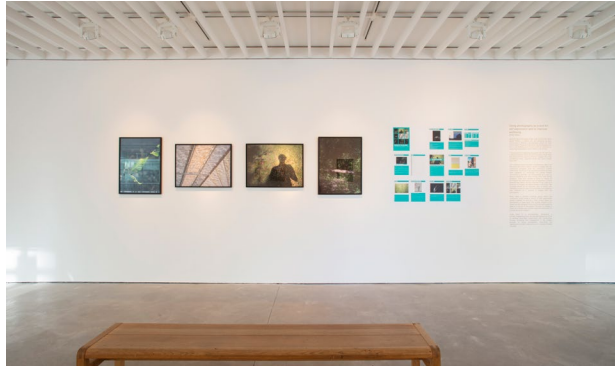
A new video work was produced, which focused on two of the group members, Dolly and Joan. The video work reflected upon the close ties, trust and friendships, which form overtime and echo the wider values of the whole group.

Also as part of We Are Kirkby, a new collaboration was developed between Tony Mallon and the staff and service users and local residents accessing the Kirkby Resource Centre. Tony worked closely with individuals (many of whom live with dementia) and staff

to explore alternative techniques of how storytelling and physical movement can act as a trigger for key memories in people's lives.

Both projects were showcased within Kirkby Gallery and through public realm spaces using empty shopping spaces throughout the high street. The Northward Golden Years group used one of the shopping units to further engage with the public through drop in coffee mornings every Friday the exhibition ran.

# COLLECTIVE MATTERS



Collective Matters celebrated and reflected upon a series of socially engaged projects developed over the past two to three years across the North West region. Over this time, artists and communities from our Paul Hamlyn programme came together to explore how photography can be used as a tool for self-expression, reflection and resilience in what is becoming an ever-increasingly isolated world. What has come from these various collaborations is a testament to the fact that with creativity comes purpose, belonging and a space to create new conversations about the people and places around us. In Gallery 1 we presented Clickmoor, a photography group from MyClubmoor working with artists

Emma Case and Katherine Monaghan, and Haven, a collaborative project by photographer Stephanie Wynne and Wirral Women Group. Gallery 2 showcased work by recent graduates from our joint Socially Engaged Photography MA with the University of Salford. Featured graduates are Gerard Francis, Rachel Mason, Lāsma Poiša with Snappy Valley, and Andy Yates.

Expanding on the display on our external wall, Gallery 3 displayed part of the cross-site exhibition Just Between Friends by artists Gary Bratchford and Robert Parkinson, with community members from Castlefields, Runcorn, recently established as the Phoenix Amateur Photography Group (PAP).

**“Love the way photography has been the medium for community creativity and positive mental health.”**

**— Audience member**



Collective Matters reflected ideas of what we love, what inspires us, what frustrates us, and ultimately what makes us human. With this, we wanted to know what matters to our wider audiences and so created a dedicated space in Gallery 2, as well as an online programme to continue conversations through interactive

sessions, pop-up showcases, talks and workshops. In this respect, this show was not the final product, but simply part of the journey. We explore, we learn and we share. With this comes growth for our communities, our artists, for us as a gallery and for our audience. Collectively, we are community.

## The Narrative Turn

### A response to the Collective Matters exhibition

As a social scientist I have long been convinced by the power of stories. The 'narrative turn' in the social sciences has, over the past three decades, recognised the role stories can play in informing human life. Stories do not only provide information; they also give form to the mess and confusion of life. Stories can also suggest the possibility of change and might offer alternatives to the hegemonic norms that dominate society; and storytelling is a collaborative enterprise.

The sense of companionship that story offers is because of the necessity of a relationship between teller and listener. I received a timely reminder of this when I attended the opening of Collective Matters at the Open Eye Gallery, a display of socially engaged photography projects in the North West. I had been invited by Bill Plews, one of the members of North Liverpool-based Clickmoor Photography Group. I was given a warm welcome when I arrived at the gallery on that wet October evening but it took a little while for me to adjust to being in a room full of people again, the long months of isolation during the pandemic having taken their toll in ways that remained difficult to contextualise and harder still to articulate.

When I had settled in, Bill enthusiastically talked me through

his work, and that of the other members of Clickmoor whose contributions he was well versed in. Facilitated by artists Emma Case and Kat Monaghan, the group was established prior to the pandemic in the days when its members could enjoy social meet-ups. Yet the group flourished during lockdown when members continued to get together weekly – albeit virtually – and it became a source of sustenance and companionship.

It is the work produced during this weird and challenging time that forms Reflect, part of the Collective Matters programme. This was by necessity work that took place in the home or not far from it and everyday images in the exhibition simultaneously feel familiar yet strange in the way they have been juxtaposed: a washing machine, a garden path, a memorial bench and a boat. Although each member of the group has selected just a handful of photos to display on the pristine white wall of the gallery, as Bill noted, 'This is a wall full of stories'. Indeed, as I was to discover, the whole gallery was bursting with them: tales of identities, communities, connections and relationships.

The Wirral Women group, who share gallery space with Clickmoor, have their own stories to tell. Women from diverse backgrounds – Indonesia,

Bolivia, Tehran – have worked with photographer Stephanie Wynne to produce 3D montages of photographs. Taken during the pandemic, these intriguing, jewel-coloured images are displayed in wooden drawers that hang on the gallery wall. The exhibition is called Haven and there is a sense that the drawers are keeping safe that which is precious to the photographers: beloved family members who have been unreachable for so long due to travel restrictions; comforting customs from the women's home countries including a tea ceremony; the small pleasures of life in lockdown Britain – a blooming hanging baskets and a glorious sunset. The viewer is invited into these worlds and given an opportunity to imagine what it might be like to live them, outside the confines of the wooden cases.

Film, photography and ephemera from the participatory project Just Between Friends are displayed upstairs in the gallery. A community group in Castlefields, Runcorn, joined forces with Robert Parkinson and Gary Bratchford to explore the locality through a variety of creative methods. Whilst all the projects in Collective Matters are as much about process as the finished pieces, this is made particularly explicit in Just Between Friends. Glass vitrines

are filled with notes and sketches which chart the project's three-year journey, and the viewer learns about the meals that participants shared and the conversations and friendships these engendered.

A large Ordnance Survey map is displayed which documents the literal journeys that participants took on photo-walks; meandering routes have been carefully hand drawn on the map. A parallel exhibition, of public installations, is taking place in Castlefields. It was a testament to the convivial display at the Open Eye Gallery, that I was drawn to accept the invitation to go and explore it when I happened to be in the area some weeks later. It was well worth the visit!

This is such important work. When I left the gallery that evening, to push through the drizzle back to the train station, I felt a little lighter. The time I had spent with the art, and the conversations I had shared about it, had given me the opportunity to process some of those discombobulating experiences of the past 18 months. That is the power of art and community, of telling stories through familiar and startling images.

**Dr Victoria Foster**  
**Associate Director Institute**  
**for Social Responsibility**  
**Edge Hill University**



# RESPONSIVE PROGRAMME



**“The Responsive Programme is a model that other institutions should take note of; such genuine collaboration and support for smaller organisations...who often operate on shorter timescales due to capacity, is rare.”**

**— Responsive Programme partner**

Our Paul Hamlyn funding supported Open Eye Gallery to deliver its first responsive programme. We have been working towards co-authoring our programme with communities, voluntary organisations, photographers and artists, and as a consequence many of our exhibitions, education projects and events are developed with our partners and associates.

As part of this ambition, we extended our approach of working to be of benefit to even more people. We did this through inviting expressions of interest from people who wanted to work with Open Eye Gallery as a sharing platform for their ideas and projects.

We invited people who share our values to contact us if they wished to utilise our facilities for their own event or showcase.

Projects have included a range of collaborations – from exhibitions with aim to raise awareness of modern slavery to NHS interventions exploring the challenges experienced in breastfeeding. Other projects have included LGBTQ+ focused film screenings, participatory poetry events, socially engaged exhibitions and workshops connecting with the recovery community.



# AN ECOLOGY OF CARE



An Ecology of Care is an exhibition bringing together a series of innovative socially engaged projects reflecting the intimate stories of care, relationships and resilience within our community.

‘Care’ and ‘community’ have become buzzwords in recent years, but the projects included in An Ecology of Care exhibition attempt to highlight the genuine power of collective discussion and action from those with lived experiences in relation to health and social care.

In Gallery 1 space and on our exterior wall we showcased Bound/ Frayed, a collaborative project between photographer Tadhg Devlin and a number of staff and people supported by the social care charity, Community Integrated Care. Gallery 1 also contained our reading corner, showcasing a series of publications by recent graduates from our joint Socially Engaged Photography MA with the University of Salford. Joseph Lee showcased a selection of images from his Mindful Photo project postcard series.

**“I worked as a carer for those with dementia for several years and the Amelia/Amelia guide to care really resonated with me and moved me. A really beautiful and poignant piece of work.”**

**— Audience member**

The project explores the potential of a combined practice of mindfulness and photography to forge connections through a series of collaborative workshop sessions with various groups across the North West of England and Wales.

Vilija Subkute’s publication, *Alone*, documents the lives of over 60s who lived alone during the Covid 19 pandemic through imagery and personal testimony created by each participant, alongside Vilija’s portraiture work.

Both works sit within the gallery’s reading corner, beside a previous work by Tadhg Devlin, *Amelia* and *Amelia*; a DIY survival guide

for caring for someone living with dementia. This publication was co-produced with participant Amelia Roach and traces the reality of her experiences caring for a family member living with dementia. In Gallery 2 we presented *From Across the Kitchen Table* (Who is the Community?), a collaboration with people living with dementia in Liverpool and Mersey Care NHS Foundation Trust.

Our upstairs gallery shared the national touring programme, *Holding Time*, produced by photographic artist Lisa Creagh and a group of local mothers. The project challenges stereotypes and preconceptions about breastfeeding in the UK.





# THE WATCH FACTORY PROJECT

Artists Sam Batley and Marge Bradshaw worked as photographers in residence with local residents from the Watch Factory for 9 months throughout 2022.

The building itself, and the residents who live there, bring a rich social history of the local area. Originally the home of the Lancashire Watch Company, the factory is a significant part of Prescott's local history and was converted into an extra-care scheme in 2018. Some of the residents remember the original factory and had relatives who used to work there so the building represents the very fabric of the residents who still live there today.

The artists and residents looked into the area's past, their personal connections to it and also their role as 'watch factory custodians' of the space today, all through experimenting with different

photographic styles and techniques including creative writing, film and digital photography, cameraless photography (creating lumen prints and cyanotypes) and mixed media collage. By sharing stories and leading the process, the group asserted their identity, made new social connections and gained photography skills, resulting in a sense of community.

A series of works were produced as a permanent installation within the public facing spaces of the ground floor, alongside framed works situated throughout the building as a legacy to the project and for future generations of the Watch Factory to enjoy.



Work was created by Watch Factory residents Brenda, Cathy, David, Dot, Freda, Jane, Marie, Nelly, Peggy. We'd like to thank our student volunteers David Hiney and Eleni Karypidou from University of Salford for supporting the engagement work. This project was one of our co-commissions with national social care charity, Community Integrated Care.

As a legacy to the programme, the artists and Open Eye Gallery are supporting the group to continue running the project as a self-sustained photography club for Watch Factory residents as well as people from their local neighbourhood.

**"I've really enjoyed coming to the Photography Club. I've learnt how an image can tell that story and coming along to the sessions has made me become more aware of my surroundings and my local area – such as nature and architecture. It's also got my brain working and made me use my imagination. I'm really proud to have taken part in something that will be long-lasting and a legacy at the Watch Factory, and am looking forward to the exhibition."**

**— Marie, the Photography Club participant**

The following text was a letter written by one of our participants, Jane, for the exhibition opening of The Watch Factory Project, shortly before she passed away.



they say

*every picture tells a story*

well now I know what this means.

I now look beyond the image (look at me using the lingo !) and try and find the reason the image was taken

what is the artist trying to convey?

do I like it or not and why?

what emotions does it invoke?

these are just a few of the issues that we have explored over the past 6 months.

Sam and Marge have been incredible over this time teaching and supporting us in all that we undertook. ably supported by Eleni and David.

from leaving us to our own devices with disposable cameras to being taught how to take camera less images which you will see today.

at the beginning I was very apprehensive about how I was going to get involved but the guys did an excellent job of finding solutions to our many foibles.

I would like to thank Community Integrated Care and Liz from the open eye gallery for commissioning the course and if there is anyone here with a budget we would love to do the next level (if you don't ask you don't get)

I have thoroughly enjoyed myself and learnt a lot about image taking and myself along the way a big massive thank you and hope you will stay in touch with support and encouragement



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