



**PSYCHOSOCIAL RESEARCH UNIT**

**Qualitative Evaluation of the Super Slow Way  
Programme**

**2015-2017**

**PART 2**

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## Contents

<b>PART 2. CASE STUDIES AND VIGNETTES.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>The Exbury Egg .....</b>	<b>4</b>
Introduction .....	4
Process and Model of Engagement.....	5
Support from Super Slow Way .....	7
Legacy and sustainability .....	7
<b>Outcomes .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Conclusions .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>idle women (on the water) .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>The research: informants and context .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>The visual matrix: participants and overview .....</b>	<b>12</b>
The imagery, ideas and affective environment of the matrix .....	13
A safe women’s space .....	13
The inter-twining of personal and regional histories: a sense of loss .....	14
Cross-generational experience .....	15
‘Mature’ ambivalence and personal confidence .....	15
Connection with nature.....	16
<b>Outcomes of the project.....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Conclusions .....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Kinara Festival.....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>20</b>
Data collection .....	21
Audience engagement with diverse communities.....	22
Example 1. First night: laughter and thoughtfulness .....	23
Example 2. Love bombs and apples .....	25
Commissioning for difference .....	25
<b>Outcomes .....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>Harkat.....</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>29</b>
Commissioning process and project management.....	29
Working with local people .....	31
Refugees and asylum seekers .....	33
Engaging with children.....	34
<b>Final event, 7th October .....</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>Outcomes .....</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>Conclusions .....</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>The Circle of Friends.....</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>41</b>
Key Informants.....	41
Experience of the group .....	42
A day out with the Circle of Friends.....	42
Future hopes .....	43
<b>Outcomes .....</b>	<b>44</b>
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>Hugging the Canal.....</b>	<b>46</b>

<b>The project</b> .....	<b>46</b>
Super Slow Way context .....	47
<b>Outcomes</b> .....	<b>48</b>
<b>Conclusions</b> .....	<b>48</b>
<b>Verd de Gris</b> .....	<b>49</b>
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>49</b>
Process and model of engagement .....	49
Creative and cathartic .....	50
Shame and hope.....	53
<b>Outcomes</b> .....	<b>54</b>
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>54</b>
<b>Men Who Care</b> .....	<b>55</b>
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>55</b>
Male carers.....	55
Artist’s brief.....	56
Development of the project .....	56
<b>Outcomes</b> .....	<b>58</b>
<b>Conclusions</b> .....	<b>58</b>

## PART 2. CASE STUDIES AND VIGNETTES

### The Exbury Egg

*Everything comes from the Egg*

(Stephen Turner)

#### Introduction

The Exbury Egg was the focus of a Super Slow Way Residency at Finsley Gate Wharf, in which artist, Stephen Turner, worked in collaboration with Burnley Wood Community Centre from April to October 2016. It arrived in the spring of 2016, occupying and opening up a site beside the canal that had been gated, and closed for public access for thirty years. The space, an opening by the canal bank with empty buildings, included an old forge. It was overgrown and strewn with debris when the Egg arrived and for some time had offered an undisturbed habitat for birds and insects.

*Before I came, there had been no access to it (it had been closed by [British Waterways since 1986]. I open it to visitors for an hour a day. I invite people in to talk about life in Burnley Wood. It's very local – maybe the surrounding 15 streets. I invite people in for tea and chat ... I'm using the concept of the Egg as a conversation piece. I'm quite interested in what makes a home for people and other animals who live around and how people live together – or don't.*

(Stephen Turner)

The Egg is described as a temporary, energy efficient, self-sustaining work space and for the duration of this six-month residency it became the base for an exploration of the canal bank and its fauna and flora. It also provided a social gathering point for people from the neighbourhood and a stimulus among its visitors for drawing, photography, creative writing. There were events such as moth watching, moon gazing, blackberry picking or bug balling, or simply activities that allowed people to taking time to attend to the environment, in sympathy with the rhythms of the day and the changing seasons.

PIC: EXBURY EGG ON LOCATION

## The Exbury Egg on location

### Process and Model of Engagement

#### The Community Centre and Neighbourhood

Stephen Turner worked in collaboration with Burnley Wood Community Centre, who were instrumental in introducing him to people who would involve themselves with the project. They helped to spread the word and Turner volunteered at the Centre serving lunches there once a week to get to know people and 'normalise' his presence in the area. He also rented a small house nearby and spent time walking the surrounding streets, chatting over the walls, getting to know the neighbourhood, becoming a familiar figure and inviting people down to the wharf to visit and pass the time of day.

*There is a nice tradition in summer here of moving chairs into the front narrow yard and sitting chatting, having beers. The Egg is a conversation piece - this magical thing "Ooh look it's a spaceship"... I was worried about vandalism but nothing at all - except the sign, which only lasted 3 days.*

(Stephen Turner)

Developing relationships that were independent of the community centre was important in extending the appeal of the Egg more widely. But there was also another factor – in order to open up a third space the Egg needed to blend with the environment whilst remaining a thing apart - a presence, an idea, and a potential that would enable people to respond to nature and to one another. It had the strangeness of something that had arrived from another world, introducing a new way of seeing things, and would one day move on.

This slow immersion through a low key 'neighbourliness' offset the strangeness of 'the Egg man' and over time the work became a fixture in the area and a point of curiosity and local pride. A series of events unfolded for and with the local community who gradually began to think of the site as an asset and opportunity. Turner's natural affinity with the idea of 'slow art' meant that the Egg could seep into the consciousness of the community

*I have always felt that slow is important in an age where we somehow prefer quantity over quality, speed over depth of connection. Where we have to get something fast or not bother at all. We all need time for contemplation, consideration and the joy of really connecting with each other, the world around us and our own inner selves.*

(Stephen Turner)

#### The Egg as performance

Stephen Turner saw the whole residency as a 'performance' with himself as caretaker, so for the first three months he presented a regular report to the community centre in the form of a talk with tea and biscuits. Then, in order to widen the reach to people who didn't attend the centre, he produced a broadsheet – the Exbury Echo- which documented the life of the swans that passed through that stretch of the canal, laying eggs, raising their young and sometimes becoming both perpetrators and victims of aggression

*It's full on while I'm here – a performance in real time – I try to record everything. As Shakespeare put it, all the world's a stage with entrances and exits. I see life as art - as one cultural creative thing – and that includes making tea and chatting in the egg.*  
(Stephen Turner)

### **Purposeful intergenerational engagement**

This last quotation however belies the extent to which the Egg provided not only a point of engagement but also a structure and purpose that had inter-generational appeal. The following is an example of one of the social events

*We had a fire pit – burning waste wood from site. People brought food and I gave chocolate and marshmallows. Ruth made a moon cake and then we read Haiku. There were lots of children there. J. who I've mentioned loves Haiku and said he would bring some and read them – I researched some Japanese ones about the moon. My wife wrote some. We read for 10-15 minutes and then J. invited others. The kids were totally uninhibited and one followed another for a good half hour as we waited for the moon to come out. Their ages ranged from primary school to fourteenish. They were drawing as well (the man in the moon) as a record of the event.*

(Stephen Turner)

Turner found it was important to create some activity structure and time boundaries for the children who were attracted by the project so that they could use the Egg to learn about the site, rather than just seeing it as a distraction or playground. By focusing on the environment, including aspects of it that were unremarked upon, or unknown to local residents, Stephen managed to stage events with inter-generational appeal so that children were accompanied by their parents and any notion of art as a way of 'keeping the kids out of trouble' (a misconception evident in other projects) was gradually dispelled. Turner was clear that adult engagement was vital if the Egg was to leave any legacy.

### **Development of individuals and local groups**

For a few individuals who gave their help and became more closely involved, the Egg created a transformational opportunity. We met and spoke to a number of these residents who were helping out, or just there for support, during the Burnley Canal Festival. They spoke highly of the project and its impact on their lives

*It's been fantastic – I come as often as I can – let me tell you about all the things we've done...*

(local resident)

*I hope something carries on. This is a lovely space. I've got to know people who I used to just nod at. It's great for the kids and for all of us...*

(local resident)

Speaking of one local participant who realised she wanted to do something more with her life, Stephen alludes to what he sees as "the empowering nature of art"

*...she has become more assertive. She now sees it as her egg and has become very confident - we're going to employ her for 2 weeks to talk about it in the final wind up*

*period. She says "I haven't felt as strongly or passionately about anything for a long time".*

(Stephen Turner)

However, beyond individuals who may have developed new awareness, skills and aspirations to live differently, the environment around Egg also became a stimulus for local creative group activity – for example for local writers and amateur photographers. This development has the potential to extend the influence and sustainability of the project by offering a resource to special interest groups as well as the community at large.

### **Support from Super Slow Way**

A timescale of six months – considerably longer than some of the other community commissions or residencies - was essential to the success of the project. In this time-span the artist could craft and hone the performance, gain trust, build relationships and provide a context in which things could develop at their own pace in collaboration with local residents. Stephen made it clear he would not have accepted a shorter commission, but in the event Super Slow Way readily agreed to this timescale seeing the Egg as a natural 'fit' with the philosophy of 'slow', an opportunity to gestate an intimate relationship to a site in the hope that the community could become involved in its development and care.

Turner also felt that the support he had received from the programme had been excellent

*They've been great. I worked closely with Ruth who has gone to the nth degree to make this work – listened to my concerns, helping physically setting up, building networks, finding out things - resources being here*

*[Interviewer] So she took on aspects of a producer role?*

*yes – some things took a while, but Ruth set up the signage herself- then they were nicked. I respect SSW for bringing me in on my terms – they've supported me when I've doubted it.*

### **Legacy and sustainability**

Turner hoped that the intense interest and continued involvement of local people that has been realised in the course of the project would enable an on-going involvement in plans to develop it. He felt that investment in a local 'animateur' or development worker would build on what had been achieved in bringing people community together around a place and seeing its possibilities, but he acknowledged that there would need to be further organisational efforts to build a sense of local ownership of the site and secure its future as a cultural space. When Turner left he helped to organise a farewell event that brought members of the community together with stakeholder organisations to discuss next steps

*The event when Stephen left did go ahead and representatives from Canal and River Trust and Super Slow Way were there and everyone on the progress of the Heritage Lottery Fund bid and he listened to their ideas for what they would like to see on site. We are holding a gathering on site to welcome in the first day of spring on the 20th very much in the same spirit of Stephen's Egg events and from there we are going to*

*discuss a trip to see the Egg at Milton Keynes, further nature based work on site as part of Canal and River Trust's Bright Works project and the possibility of Burnley Wooders coming together with the Canal Side community to create a float for the canal festival.*

(Ruth Shorrock, Super Slow Way project Co-ordinator and Community Development Officer)

This is of course exactly the type of continuation activity that will build sustainability for the project, but it depends at this stage on ongoing input from organizational stakeholders (Super Slow Way or Canal and River Trust) and this in turn depends on further funding. Members of the community are in the process of acquiring the organizational capacity and determination and an understanding of the value of art in this context, to take this activity forward, ideally in the form of time from a community development worker. The Egg has prepared the ground, created the opportunity, and in its vision for the future of the Canal, Super Slow Way sees Finsley Gate Wharf as a key hub in a “string of pearls” – a series of publicly valued linked up cultural assets and sites that will help to re-claim the Canal as a civic space.

## Outcomes

1. Over time the Egg attracted a core group of around 20 local residents, who brought family and friends and spread the word to many more casual visitors. Stephen estimates that around 80% returned for a repeat visit. Children and adults alike became involved in its activities, and the continued engagement of adults will be key to a local sense of ownership.
2. A few individuals took on a more intensive role of support – effectively as local ‘ambassadors’ for the project, and for these people the Egg built confidence, interest in art, and an appreciation about what it could offer to a community.
3. A number of organised groups became involved and these could play an important part in sustaining interest, care of, and benefit from the site. Besides the community centre, the original key partner, these interest groups included the scouts and guides, natural history and photography and creative writing groups. Turner had no success in engaging local schools, and acknowledged that this was a shame – but the site could still be a significant resource for them going forward.
4. The site was cleaned up and transformed from semi-derelict to an attractive public space.
5. Less visibly, but equally or even more important, new relationships and networks were formed among engaged local people helping to grow a sense of local civic responsibility with interest and pride in the canal and curiosity for the habitats it offers to flora and fauna.
6. Among the people who engaged there was a growing awareness of the value of art in opening up access to and curiosity about the natural environment.
7. Plans are afoot to pursue funding to regenerate the buildings and use them as a public cultural resource. Much of the activity has been captured by film and photography, which could be archived there. The potential of the forge as an exhibition and activity space was demonstrated through its use for film screenings.



The effective generation of local interest should now support further capital funding applications to regenerate and plans for a local café.

## Conclusions

The Egg's success in overwhelmingly white working class and socially conservative Burnley Wood, was achieved through the hyper-local, attentive and granular 'infiltration' of a way of seeing and attending to nature and the environment. This gradually instilled in the community the idea of 'owning' and caring for a public space as a communal resource. Many of the relationships formed in the process have been quietly transformative at an individual and community level. Members of the community became actively involved developing ideas for the future of the site through a Heritage Lottery bid, and have specific plans to continue activities in the spirit of the Egg. The attachment they formed to it will be maintained through visiting it in its new location. The Egg became a 'good object' for the community it built.

The Egg raised public awareness of the Super Slow Way programme among the residents of Burnley Wood, and for the longer term it raised awareness of the potential of the Canal as a public asset and leisure space with its own unique architecture and natural environment. As a significant 'destination' at the Burnley Canal Festival in September 2016, it offered a 'natural heritage' site in contrast to the fairground atmosphere and built environment of the other spaces where festival events were staged. This demonstrated how these different facets of the canal could potentially work together as a linked up leisure space for canal-side communities and the wider public.

This vision will require funding and organisation, as well a cultural programme that can continue to animate the space and the people who live there. There will be an important role for local volunteers in making this happen but there needs to be an interim strategy to ensure that the legacy of the Egg is sustained. The plans to upgrade Finsley Gate Wharf as one of the key 'hubs' along the canal are an exciting development. By connecting the site with other major assets in the next phase of the Super Slow Way/Canal and River Trust partnership, a project which began within the confines of one small locality will help to extend people's sense of a much longer canal as a public space and cultural heritage.

It should be emphasised that one of the major achievements of the Egg was to mobilise 'human cultural capital' - the relationships, enthusiasm, talent and capacity to care for the environment in a community that had hitherto benefitted from little cultural investment and therefore had low expectations and confidence in their capacity to bring about improvements. It raised levels of local interest and a sense of ownership of *'their'* canal, and their continued involvement should be a major plank of regeneration plans going forward.

## idle women (on the water)

### Introduction

idle women is an art project and organisation conceived and realised by Rachel Anderson and Cis O'Boyle, of which the touring arm is idle women (on the water). Anderson and O'Boyle were both disenchanted with the London art scene and its commercial and essentially patriarchal values and wanted to produce a project for women in areas where there was little or no arts provision. As Cis O'Boyle said in an initial interview "I wanted to be of service". idle women's work in East Lancashire with Super Slow Way is the first of three Creative People and Places commissions which will entail their working with Creative Scene (Huddersfield/Dewsbury) and Heart of Glass (St Helens).

With a substantial grant from the Arts Council Strategic Touring, as well as the Creative People and Places commissions, idle women (on the water) has been designed as a floating 'basecamp' for a women's art project. Its centrepiece is composed of two boats – The Adelaide Norris, named after a feminist Sci Fi heroine which provides living quarters for Anderson and O'Boyle and has a motor for touring; and, within a few months of start up in the autumn of 2016, the project had completed the build of a butty (motor-less boat) - The Selina Cooper, named after a local Suffragette which was initially custom designed by Humraaz Women's Refuge through workshops with Rachel and Cis. The designs were drawn by architectural practice, Muf. Muf, who were a natural choice to explore the potential of the butty, since, as a practice they have researched women's use of space, especially the often restricted, intimate domestic spaces available to them in the households where they live. The Selina Cooper was built with female builders at the forefront and finished off by Anderson and O'Boyle along with local women.

After the completion of the boats, Humraaz, which serves South Asian women in and around Blackburn, continued to work with idle women, offering support and refuge services to Black and Asian women who have suffered domestic violence and abuse. It was felt to be important that project work should be initiated with some of the most vulnerable women in the area and those who had least access to the publicly funded arts and culture. Humraaz has been one of idle women's most enduring partners amongst women's organisations.

idle women (on the water) was launched from its mooring in Burnley on International Women's day in 2016 and has since hosted three separate month-long residencies by artists Martina Mullaney, with daughter and dog in Burnley; theatre maker, Mojisola Adebayo in Church, Accrington; and artist Karen Mirza in Nelson. Alongside these residencies there has been a programme of events including projects by artists Sarah Cole, Michelle Wren, Candice Purwin & Raksha Patel for women local to the towns where the boats were moored and visitors. Most importantly, networks of relationships with local women's organisations and individuals have been built around the project in all of these locations where the narrowboat has moored.

PIC: IDLE WOMEN GATHERING AND WORK

## **idle women: gathering and work**

It is important to highlight the particular challenges the project presented. In the first instance there was the sheer hard labour of living on a narrowboat and trying to work intensively from it without the taken for granted facilities of fixed accommodation. However more important were the emotional challenges and sense of vulnerability and exposure that came from the abuse that Anderson and O'Boyle suffered at times in some locations. Clearly nothing like a women's art project had ever been seen on this stretch of the canal and it provoked threatening and aggressive responses, particularly from some male landowners and male youth. Anderson and O'Boyle had set out to create a safe space for women (as we shall see below) without experiencing a similar sense of physical and psychological safety for themselves. This was compounded by the fact that they were working in areas with no arts infrastructure that could have provided them with moral support and sympathetic participants who had experience of what the arts could offer to women. In the early months of the project, when things were particularly stressful for them, Super Slow Way was still building itself as an organisation and moving rapidly into delivery mode, and Anderson and O'Boyle felt unsupported, vulnerable and left to struggle alone. It was not until an artists' reflection day was held that the opportunity to have their voices heard arose. They were clearly experienced, self-contained, highly competent, with considerable capacity to make things happen. It was therefore possible to underestimate how exposed and vulnerable they felt at times. In our view, one of the key areas of learning for the programme (in common with other Creative People and Places programmes) during the first year has been how best to support artists and producers, particularly women, working in conditions which make them vulnerable and demand of them skill sets which are not necessarily developed through an arts background.

Anderson and O'Boyle recognized that besides delivering an art project, they were engaged in emotional labour in taxing conditions and they sought independent professional supervision from a psychotherapeutically qualified practitioner external to the Super Slow Way programme. It was here that they found the psychological containment to be able to process for themselves some of the anxieties provoked by the work. We have devoted a section of the interim report to the question of how the programme has worked with artists and sought ways to support them. We consider that external supervision is an option that is well worth considering in some social practice situations. However, this will be a novel idea to many. The question of whether it should be used and how it improves both outcomes and the artist's experience will bear further consideration. This will continue to be an area for reflection and refinement going forward.

## **The research: informants and context**

This evaluation does not trace in detail the history and development of the project. Instead it focuses on the outcomes for local women who participated in it – the voices that it is most difficult to hear unless particular conditions are created for their in depth reflection. In order to cater for this, we arranged participation in a group based methodology led by imagery and affect called the visual matrix (see appendix for fuller description). This supplemented previous feedback: Anderson and O'Boyle were interviewed at length at the start of the project and there have been a number of follow on conversations and visits to the narrowboat, including an evening event at the Church mooring near Accrington in the summer of

2016. At that point on the canal there is a small green space next to the churchyard with room for a table and chairs. Sausages were barbecued (meat and vegetarian) for a group of women of varying ages who had become regular visitors to the protected women's space that Anderson and O'Boyle had created through their presence. Local residents from nearby white working class estates, women from the local women's centre, and women associated with Humraaz had been brought together on a regular basis through idle women and had taken part in a variety of creative art and craft activities and poetry writing as well as enjoying the sociability afforded by the safe women's space created. This was an idyllic and miraculously midge-free summer evening of chatting and sharing food while finishing touches were added to a mural on a nearby wall that had been painted by women over the preceding weeks.

## PIC: IDLE WOMEN MURAL

### **idle women: Mural**

A herd of mares grazed on the opposite bank while their piebald foals chased each other back and forth across the field and swans gathered around the porthole of the boat for scraps. The significance of this setting and how it shaped the imaginations of the women who participated in the project will become clear as we discuss the visual matrix (below)

### **The visual matrix: participants and overview**

The visual matrix is a facilitated group based process in which participants associate to a visual stimulus and then to one another producing together a 'collage' of interwoven images ideas, affects. It is followed by a post-matrix discussion with the participants that maps the clusters of imagery, intensities of feeling and thought that emerge from the matrix. The subsequent analysis is undertaken by the research team. It is a particularly useful way to capture the emotional, aesthetic and cognitive content and form of shared experience, and was therefore a method of choice in this context.

The idle women visual matrix was held in a hall in Accrington in November 2016 after the Selina Cooper had moved on from its Church mooring. Billed as an evaluation and social event combined, it largely consisted of women from the Accrington phase of the project (described above) together with two teenage girls who were ambivalent about participating in the visual matrix but keen to share the food and Karaoke after the event. The visual matrix was an opportunity that the group used to reflect on three main dimensions of their experience:

- firstly, the memories that remained most strongly with them from the summer, and the emotional and imaginative legacy of the project
- secondly, what it had meant to them in terms of the solidarity and friendship they had shared with one another

- thirdly, the sense of connection they had achieved through the project to the natural and built environment of the canal, and to Lancashire's industrial history and its decline

idle women had been, for all of them, an important, and at times transformative, experience as the visual matrix data below will show. The matrix gave them an opportunity to emotionally re-enact, and explore what the project had given them and also acknowledge the sense of gratitude and loss prompted by its departure. This led to a questioning of whether they might be able to continue to meet in the future from time to time – a question which was discussed more fully in the post-matrix de-brief and discussion. The setting and backdrop to all of this thinking was the canal and its surrounding scenery, which for the group became an ambivalent symbol of hope and connectivity on the one hand, and of isolation and dereliction on the other.

### The imagery, ideas and affective environment of the matrix

Perhaps because the women in the group were acutely conscious of loss - personal, cultural historical - the emotional tone of this matrix was elegiac from beginning to end. Insofar as elegy is a celebration of things past, imbued with a loving relationship to those things and a sadness at their passing, it also contains a kernel of hope for the future.

The optimistic note with which the matrix begins is associated with being close to the water: the excitement of being in a space apart, "out of this world" as one woman puts it. Much of what follows is in praise of this 'other-worldly' place - the place that came into being for these women in and around the narrowboat, its art-space and the surroundings. The following ideas emerged from the visual matrix and are directly expressed and illustrated through quotations.

### A safe women's space

First and foremost the women had gained from this 'other place' an experience of friendship and sisterhood which they attributed in no small measure to the generosity and attentiveness of Anderson and O'Boyle, and their understanding that before anything could happen there had to be a protected space for women.

- *I think that Cis and Rachel are very, very special people. They're very caring. And they instilled that in other women and all the women who came there were caring and friendly towards each other and they were good friends to each other. There was always a very giving and safe feeling.*
- *I think it was an issue around women and their safety because i don't really feel safe in the country as a woman and i think it was really, really pleasant for us to be able to go there. It was a safe space created for us by the facilitators.*

Through idle women the group clearly discovered a sense of a trusted community where once they might have felt insecure, physically and socially. Instead

*...when we were in the actual space, you know how many things came, it's like personal, upbringing, luxuries, struggles from their childhood and everything, and family and circumstances and really in a place of privilege when someone is trusting you up to that level, sharing their feelings, emotions with you.*

The question in all their minds – voiced towards the end of the session was whether and how the legacy of the summer would endure.

### **The inter-twining of personal and regional histories: a sense of loss**

Once the conditions of safety have been created, a new potential for connection, and the pleasures of being part of a community of women, are discovered. However, if the feeling of connectedness is to persist it has to accommodate the fact that the narrowboat has been and gone. Before the participants themselves can move on, the matrix assigns itself a task of a double mourning: firstly, for the immediate emptiness that remains to be filled now that The Selina Cooper, and everything it represents is no longer materially available to them, and secondly, for the decline of the region and the once thriving textile industry that had been a source of pride and had touched their families' lives. Very early on in the visual matrix this history and its personal resonance is introduced, establishing a frame for much of what follows

*The picture of the older ladies in the looms. My family for generations and generations have all been in the textile industry so it made me feel proud, really, to be from Lancashire.*

However, this is a pride coupled with an acute sense of the broad historical canvas of Lancashire's now empty mills, now compounded with a sharper, more local and more personal emptiness

*I think the emptiness is something. I think it struck me as being an empty place now and I think something like you said... there's an emptiness there for you now, which is quite, you know, it's quite sad.*

The emptiness is materialised all around in the architecture of the canal which is the setting for a sense of abandonment that must be worked through. At times the need to which the project has responded is personal and very raw

*It's one of the best summers I've had for a long, long time going there and seeing it all again, unfortunately, it reminds how, um, I don't have very much in my life. I did then. It gave me purpose. I'm quite isolated.*

The deserted buildings of the canal are loved for how they are laden with history, but also at risk if a future cannot be found for them. The emotion that gathers around this idea seems to suggest that the loss of history is intimately felt. The predicament of the Mill Towns reverberates with their own lives in different ways and perhaps especially for the women from Humraaz (represented by two participants in the matrix) whose experiences of family rupture has left them at times adrift and depleted

*I mean I love the buildings but there's a bit of sadness there. They're derelict. They are kind of a shadow of their former selves. They get knocked down for new estates*

*because it's a small country and there's not enough houses and you know it's sad really - to me it is anyway losing that history, local history, of what we were. Great mill towns that were, you know, and that's just gone and the history is going with the buildings. It's cheaper to knock down than to...*

### **Cross-generational experience**

However, there is another idea that works its way through this matrix as a counter-point to the emptiness and loss of heritage - and that is to be found in cross-generational histories that live on

*Oswaldtwistle mills do a lot of photographs on the mills and cotton mills and things and they have actually - they've got models actually inside Oswaldtwistle mills where you can actually walk round and look at them. Somewhere in there there is a photograph of my Dad and my Grandma.*

The traces of earlier generations implicitly highlight the different patterns of migration and settlement that these women and their families have experienced. Amid these instabilities, personal connections live on. These feelings are welded through the matrix to an awareness of new connections that the women have made across the cultural differences in the group and this is a source of both surprise and hope. The differences, however, need to be named and at first there is a degree of awkwardness around racialised difference— the matrix at this point departs from working with imagery, as is typical when it begins to get mired in difficulty

*It's nice sometimes just to have women and not have any other things that we could just kind of - women who would have never met - you know what I mean and actually finding common ground. When you were saying Asian people and white people - unfortunately there is a segregation - you know what I mean? You would be lying if you said there wasn't but I think, you know, it's... I think it's important all getting together actually learning about what especially in this climate where Islam, you know Muslim, and they have negative connotations towards it and it isn't nice.*

The key for the group is a commonality of women's experience, some of it grounded in anxiety and fear – hinted at here, but not explicitly explored.

### **'Mature' ambivalence and personal confidence**

The visual matrix constantly navigates the temptations of romanticisation and regret with what might be described as a mature reflective ambivalence. For example it finds a solution to the sense of loss in the idea of emptiness as something that needs to be faced; only then can it be re-filled, and experienced as a clean slate to be re-written

*I thought those images with the view on, the panoramic view, although it was a lovely image it was quite empty. There were no barges there, no people, no swans, no horses like the slate had been cleaned.*

At this point the women go on to consider the resources the project has helped them to develop. The next thought is of the rich mix of women who had gathered together through idle women and the contribution that each of them had made. It was a place



*...where anybody would come - say a very easy going person to a very highly intellectual person could go. And we had a luxury of meeting people from all over - some people [even] came from London.*

There was something about this mix of different backgrounds, in the context of the welcome the group extended so easily and naturally, and the solidarity and friendliness it conveyed, that brought to mind images, offered to the matrix, of the smiles on women's faces. The authenticity of these smiles helped counter the internalisation of negativity surrounding women's roles and capacities

*...you've got something else to give. You know what I mean? Draw on those things, because, you know, I think it's a lot about negativity, cause if you tell yourself that you can't do this, you can't do that but actually just give it a go and try and see, and actually get something from that and it's like that confidence to actually to think you're good enough to aspire to something else i suppose.*

The two trains of thought – Lancashire's formerly confident history of industry and the confidence, and the solidarity that they had found for themselves through idle women were eventually brought together through a single archival image that they had shared, and that now resonated strongly with their recent experience

*I think the picture of all the women facing forwards with their arms around each other i think it made me think of it was a project which brought together people who would otherwise never have met and barriers were broken down, common ground was found and I think it brought out sisterhood again, of women.*

### **Connection with nature**

There was another aspect to this new-found confidence – the sense of being at home in another element through their connection with nature. For local women who had grown up in the vicinity of the canal and whose children had used it as a playground, there was perhaps less caution. For others who had spent much of their lives in domestic settings which themselves were unsafe, connecting with nature and animal life was a great pleasure, although not one without its own risks. The first images surround the culturally ambiguous figure of the dog as aggressor, and then as victim, when it becomes a receptacle for projected human aggression.

*And you know that the person that was with the dog - he didn't even stop the dog attacking. The mum and dad did. Very forcefully he got that swan free from the dog but then the dog ran and the man didn't even stop. He would just shout for the dog come back or something. It shows that everybody needs to to take responsibility to preserve the nature.*

*...You know there were so many other people coming with dogs but never ever anyone attacked... We were all sitting there and people were passing. It shows that this ... is not in the animal – it's the person's responsibility...and understanding*



From this point on, an identification with the fragility of living things begins to develop as the matrix brings to mind broken legs - first of a cygnet, then a horse and then of Mojisola Adebayo – who since her residency with idle women had also been grounded by a broken leg. Coming quite early in the session this succession of damaged creatures, animal and human, speaks to a sense of vulnerability and brokenness that is also very present in the group. It is another implicit link with the ‘brokenness’ of Lancashire’s industrial past. However, nature and the animal world also provide a healing image as the matrix circles back to the theme of protection – a scene witnessed on the far side of the canal is described

*...the horses had babies there and we understood a little bit more about their way of life and how you know they - and one day we came a baby was born. And the foal was on the ground and none of the horses were ... until the baby got up and started moving around ...So, all of them crowded around that little foal. Wildlife that needs protection It was really a pleasure to be able to see something from such close quarters. Well, i've never seen anything like that before. I've seen horses on the TV and as a child in Pakistan... but not babies fresh and newborn and protected.*

It is directly after this imagery of birth, cooperation and mutual protection that the participants begin to talk about the creativity of the project, a creativity that they have been able to discover in themselves through the exchange images of things they have made, poems they have written, and food they have shared.

Emblematic of this collective creativity is the mural – a painting of a summer scene from nature - that a number of the women created together on a wall close to the boat’s mooring. This is the most visible legacy of their presence as a group, a source of pride, a testimony to their achievement and something that to their relief and delight has so far withstood potentially destructive elements in the environment.

- *The before and after pictures of the wall where the mural was. I'm not a negative person but I've thought from time to time I wonder if it's been painted over, sort of vandalised.*
- *No it hasn't. It's not vandalised.*
- *No? Brilliant.*
- *Nobody's wrote on it. It's still there cause I just live around the corner from it, I just live up the road, so I don't have so far to go. I've been walking past it and sometimes you still get people stopping and looking at it. So i just walked past and still look at it.*
- *And apparently, if you catch the train, you can see it from the train as well. And I just found out that there's houses being built over the wall so we're hoping it just stays*
- *It was like we left something there that's still alive in that surrounding and passer-by - they were stopping and they were saying “oh, what a wonderful transformation”...*

## Outcomes of the project.

1. idle women (on the water) created a vibrant floating women’s project, with residencies and associated programmes of activity that created new opportunities for women in an area of low arts activity to provide a creative, sociable and protected space.

2. It succeeded in bringing together women of different backgrounds who formed a mutually sympathetic and supportive group around the project, and specifically saw themselves as gaining from the inter-cultural nature of the group.
3. It made imaginative use of a narrowboat and butty, blending with the environment, history and architecture of the canal and highlighting women's contribution to Lancashire's industrial heritage.
4. Working without pre-defined outputs it added to Super Slow Way's programme as another articulation of 'slow'. This involved a gradual building of relationships with women and their organisations grounded in a way of living on and beside the canal that allowed a re-appropriation of personal and collective histories.
5. It demonstrated to the great satisfaction of the participants the sense of solidarity and sisterhood that could be achieved by working collaboratively and non-patriarchally with local women and with women artists.

## Conclusions

Idle women (on the water) made an immense and very particular contribution to the Super Slow Way, entirely in tune with the ethos of 'slow art' and able to make full use of the canal – linking it up physically as Selina Cooper moved between moorings. It did this socially and interculturally through the women it brought together and artistically through the residencies and local activities it hosted. Paradoxically, because it was a such a contained and generative environment, including living quarters and art space complete within itself - it may have seemed at times to Super Slow Way programme staff as an something of outlier, able to get on with the job of creating a mobile women's cultural space without need for further support. In fact Anderson and O'Boyle found the physical conditions of living on the narrowboat for such an extended period, and the emotional conditions of having to contend with abuse from hostile local men along the canal, extremely taxing, especially during the early part of the project. Their overcoming this reflected the strength of their determination, sheer hard work and endurance, the 'slow' nature of the project which allowed to relationships with women to develop, a multitude of good ideas for local activities, and the sustenance that they were able to get from the women's milieu they managed to create around the project.

Our visual matrix evaluation shows that despite the deceptively easy sociability and enjoyment idle women created, the depth of women's engagement was profound weaving together personal lives and traumas with a sense of women's contribution to the history and industry of the region. They did this by including extremely vulnerable women with traumatic personal histories and little previous access to the public realm. In this way they discovered new shared pleasures in the here-and-now of the canal environment, natural and man-made. The women who visited participated in full acknowledgement of the cultural distinctions between them, working their way through difference to reach for a mutual understanding and sisterhood based on their commonalities.

*I think people said how can you get Asian women and white women together. There was loads of Asian women other than us two. We all got on very well. We never had an issue because we were women - we had our own issues (laughs).*



# Kinara Festival

## Introduction

The aim of the Kinara Festival was to provide people residing in East Lancashire the opportunity to experience some of the best South Asian Art in the UK. The festival was also infused with other influences, for example from Syria, Morocco, Spain, Palestine, Turkey and Persia. Kinara is Urdu for 'border, edge, brink, margin, verge, where water meets land'<sup>1</sup>. The festival was a significant investment on the part of Super Slow Way, and delivered in partnership with Love and Etiquette and Skiddle over four weekends from the 8<sup>th</sup> to 31<sup>st</sup> July 2016.

The aim was to ensure that South Asian Art the heritage of South Asian and Muslim populations in the region occupied a particularly prominent position in the programme and was made available to a wide and culturally heterogeneous audience. The idea of Kinara came from Rizwan Iqbal, founder and Director of *Love and Etiquette*, a South Asian Art and Music company based in East Lancashire. The challenge was to encourage the diverse population of South Asian heritage, including Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs, to leave their homes, televisions and normal leisure activities and to attend one of the many and varied events that took place over the four weekends of the festival. However, the quality of the programming, blend of art forms and global influences were designed to ensure that the festival attracted a very mixed audience. Laurie Peake, Director of Super Slow Way has pointed out that there has been virtually no previous publicly funded cultural programming for these communities in East Lancashire and there are no established habits of cultural attendance among them in this area.

From the first day in Nelson, all the way along the canal route to the Burnley Mechanics Institute, audiences were given the opportunity to witness some of the most creative, thoughtful and engaging Muslim, South Asian and/or other world artists, from the UK and from further afield. The Kinara festival included *Awaaz*, the use of *voice* in poetry performances and workshops from (inter)national artists, for example Avaes Mohammad a poet from Blackburn weaving together words about Islam, Lancashire and Pakistan. It also featured *Dekho* (look) exploring how visual arts and words shape a narrative, from artists such as Peter Saunders whose photography takes in Lancashire landscape and Islamic culture and spirituality around the world. *Lok Virsa* signifying 'heritage' was represented with the performance of Hum Kalaam and artists celebrating South Asian heritage with a kaleidoscope of dance, drummers, singing and poetry from Pakistan. There was also *Safa* meaning journey as musicians from across the Islamic world reflected the journey of the Silk route. This festival included poetry, song, dance, classical Indian music, painting, drawing and film. There was comedy that made the audience ache of laughter, and photography of what the eye does not see; drums banged to the sound of East Lancashire, South Asia and the Middle East. As Rizwan Iqbal put it

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<sup>1</sup> Kinara festival booklet (2016)

*My primary aim was to represent Islamic arts in a traditional and contemporary context. The main aim of Kinara was to produce something like a traditional mela festival. Using the mela template which has been a traditional arts and cultural festival for Asian people, over the years, but has recently been given a more Islamic slant, which in my view has curtailed some of it's creativity.*

*These were set up by the elders, but as council funding was cut, they were the first things that went, apart from the Manchester mela, we have seen their demise. Those elders or uncles, as I call them, have not been able to re-engage with that type of festival. My primary aim was to develop a shape of a festival, programme it with high quality, and engage with audiences of ethnic and non-ethnic origin ...despite what we think there are clear demarcations of white and non-white communities here in Pennine Lancashire. [The intention was] not to have parameters about who could come and who mustn't come, but to make the language neutral enough, but also identifiable enough for people to [feel] welcome.*

(Rizwan Iqbal)

By bringing this festival to East Lancashire Kinara created an inter-cultural encounter, in a non-threatening third space, where everyone could enjoy South Asian and other cultural forms in a Lancashire setting.

## PIC: KINARA FESTIVAL: PERFORMANCE

### **Kinara Festival: performance**

#### **Data collection**

Throughout the period of the four weekends of Kinara the evaluation team had the opportunity to experience most of the evening performances and to interview members of the audiences for each event. Observational notes of each performance were taken, along with some recordings made of the Friday evening discussions exploring the Art of Relevance, Seeing and Laughing. The festival's Director was interviewed along with staff. Monitoring forms recorded attendance by gender, age group and ethnicity.

## Audience engagement with diverse communities

The diversity of Muslim and South Asian art and culture was celebrated through the performances, workshops and films shown in the festival. These were introduced in the conversations that : the *Art of Relevance* offered conversation regarding possible barriers to participation in the arts that South Asian and wider minority ethnic communities may experience; the *Art of Being* explored how Minority ethnic communities could be better represented in performance and how South Asian community participation in the arts could be encouraged the *Art of Seeing* invited audiences to look through at the world from the view of the artists and to examine how faith can inspire artistic creativity. On the final Friday evening the *Art of Laughing* encouraged audiences to explore how ethnicity, faith and identity can be reconciled with humour.

Super Slow Way put its communications and networks at the service of the festival. However, the actual diversity of audiences depended on the particular event and location. For some events attendance was relatively low, although audiences were invariably animated and appreciative. However, others were full of people from the South Asian communities and a significant presence of white British people. This was the case at the opening weekend in the ACE centre in Nelson, and the final weekend when the comedians of South Asian and African Caribbean heritage when artists included Sajeela Kersh, Darius Davies, Nabil Abdulrashid and Prince Abdi. Artists of voice and percussion from Morocco, Spain, and voice and guitar from the UK, performed at the Burnley Mechanics. Here, the Sufi musicians took the audience on a mystical journey of *Air and Water, Earth and Fire*.

*I thought it was really high calibre, I would not expect it in a place such as Burnley. Maybe, Manchester or Birmingham. I thought they were all great, especially the (Prince Abdi) last one (white woman in her 60s)*

*As comedians you can say these things if you have personal experiences and understand about Islam, rather than other comedians who know nothing about us or the religion (Young South Asian woman)*

*We thought it was excellent, reall good comedy, talking about difficult topics with awareness, and it was great to see such a diverse audience. I think they touched on some taboo subjects, but it was done in a non-offensive way.*

(Group of young South Asian women)

The closing night brought Moroccan voice with musical instrumentation of Oud, Kanun and Percussion from Hassan Erraji; the Flamenco Qawwali by Fannah Fi Allah Sufi Qawwal with Calalita Flamenco Son (Spain); and voice, Guitar Oud and Ney from Sarah Yaseen and Mina Salama (UK), that reflected the influence of the Moors on Islamic culture, encouraging the audience to return to the theme of Kinara where water meets land.

*The purpose of these events is to bring people together. Before I lived up here I lived in London. But since I have moved up I can see, I can feel the division, and events like this are great in breaking down some of these barriers. I am not really into this stuff, but I really see the benefit for our communities and others*

(Anonymous feedback sheet)

The above event was ticketed and well attended but in most cases, for the duration of the festival, entrance was free. Laurie Peake has remarked that the Super Slow Way was aimed at a population where there are no habits of cultural attendance, at least not in conformity with the conventional ticketing models of UK arts venues. She pointed out that they have a long way to go in understanding and evolving methods of engagement and delivery that will

meet the needs of South Asian heritage populations in the area. This was borne out by some of the feedback comments such as

*Fantastic event! Was dragged here but glad I was. Keep up the great work*

(South Asian man, feedback sheet)

*More things in Nelson ..even though the people of Nelson really don't get the "going out for culture stuff"!*

(Anonymous feedback sheet)

Overall, records show that around 600 people engaged with the Kinara festival over the course of the four weekends, a solid basis for building relationships and cultural momentum. People of South Asian heritage outnumbered white British approximately two to one and women outnumbered men by as much as a third at many of the events. The peak age range was young adults (aged 25-34) The quantitative data lent support to our assessment from qualitative interviews that young South Asian women were a vocal, engaged audience who were open to new cultural experiences including controversial and challenging topics. Analysis of the many feedback sheets collected showed overwhelming acclaim which was consistently positive across events regardless of overall levels of attendance.

It appears that there is an untapped reserve of potential cultural attendance and participation. A surprising number of people, unsolicited, left their contact details and making suggestions for further programming.

*I perform rap and poetry and would love to be involved*

(Anonymous feedback sheet)

*Would love to be involved with the ideas and plans being developed ...as the themes reflect ideas of my own that have developed over a number of years*

(Anonymous feedback sheet)

Repeatedly, respondents observed that more and better publicity was required, implying that insufficient numbers knew about the Festival. Clearly where expectations are low people are not in the habit of looking out for cultural events through their normal channels of communication. it is therefore much harder to get things noticed.

### **Example 1. First night: laughter and thoughtfulness**

The opening evening provides the audience with a taste of what to expect in the forthcoming weeks. Tez Ilyas, a local comedian from Blackburn, is the main act for the night and he challenges the audience with jokes and anecdotes that have a sharp political edge, exploring the Muslim, Pakistani and South Asian experience the UK. The humour parodies ISIS and the audience laughs at the way the mainstream media portrays Muslims in the UK as ISIS sympathisers. Tez pokes fun at contemporary South Asian families and ways of life and at the awkwardness but reassuring familiarity of the strong Pakistani accents of their parents, who were brave, reckless and resilient enough to take a gamble and migrate half way across the world to try to provide a better life for themselves and their children. Tez embodies the very essence of a second generation Pakistani Muslim, a young man from Blackburn, who understands the contradictions, challenges and struggles that his generation experience in reconciling attachment to place and tradition that their parents carried, with living in a country where they often do not feel that they belong. His tales have resonance with the Asian heritage audience, and for the white British members is a window on a very

different world view. For them humour is an effective vehicle to convey the humanity of the South Asian experience, along with its pain and alienation, and find the differences and commonalities with their own.

Music is also played by Faz Shah as we enter the theatre. For the forthcoming weeks classical Indian music will be embroidered throughout the programme of events. A panel discussion follows chaired by Laurie Peake, and includes Mojisola Adebayo a playwright, poet and producer/director, Avaes Mohammed a poet, playwright and performer and Rebecca Bridgeman curator of Islamic and South Asian Arts at Birmingham Museums Trust.

*It is important to bring audiences together, who might not find themselves in the same room in any other event and that is really important. It is very boring if all the event you got to you see exactly the same people.*

(Laurie Peake, Director Super Slow Way)

This festival provides the space for the Muslim community of East Lancashire to *re-imagine* their culture and faith in a way that reconstructs their collective identity as something to be proud of, an alternative and owned world view of Islam, rather than one that they feel is overlaid in the eyes of others with negative media messages and misperceptions regarding Islam and terror.

For Mojisola Adebayo, Kinara is an opportunity to explore difference for those individuals and communities who always feel on the social, economic and political margin, who are often not heard - a platform for those within south Asian/Muslim communities who are excluded, or victimised, for example, Gay and Lesbian Muslims, those with a disability, the Deaf community. As she explains

*bell hooks a fantastic African American theorist , always begins her lecture by asking “who is not in the room?” “who is not here?”. Deaf people, probably aren’t here, people of a certain generation might not be here, to make theatre, to make art not for just who is not in the room, but who is not in the room, looking forward to the day when they may be in the room, or we go to their room ... It is the job of a theatre artist to look at what society is in need of, what is missing from the picture, who has not been spoken about? To bring those marginal voices together and to look at heroes in a new way.*

(Mojisola Adebayo)

This then is a framing and foundation for Kinara - It enables people who do not feel art or theatre is about them, to share a cultural space. Mojisola is a London based artist and her plea to embrace difference and the commonality in third space, may well have been viewed by some as metropolitan perspective. We can only speculate on this but it touches on sensitive areas of liberalism and social conservatism for both white and South Asian heritage communities. The point to be made is that the artists in Kinara did not shy away from these issues – they held them up to the light through comedy, performance, poetry and discussion, creating a temporary arts based forum where they could be questioned, challenged or promoted as the vignette of Love Bombs and Apples below will show.



## Example 2. Love bombs and apples

Asif is the sole actor in this play, seamlessly and convincingly slipping from one character to another. The characters are four young men: A young Palestinian living in Gaza who depicts the brutal realities of life there through the prism of a brief relationship with a young western woman. He then takes on the part of a young Asian man in Hackney who parodies the contradictions of being aware of terrorism, but not being a part of it. His third character is a young man from Bradford who depicts a local Muslim perspective that is one dimensional and extreme, in that all things to do with Islam are good and 'non-believers' will have to change their ways. The fourth character is that of a young American of Jewish heritage who reveals complexity of the Middle East through his relationship with his girlfriend. Asif is a brilliant performer, he changes characters with ease.

The play explores the messiness of relationships, personal politics, oppression and discrimination Muslims experience around the world, the contradictions of Islam and migration; also the commonality, difference and inter-dependence of all of our lives. What it presents to the audience is contradiction, paradoxes, ambiguities - lines are often blurred, and contingent; place, space and race are criss-crossed by the politics of gender.

After the performance, the audience are fulsome in their praise. Two young Muslim women appreciated its challenges

*I think it will be well received, the only problem is that many people around here, Nelson, do not come to stuff like this. They are used to traditional festivals, but not exploring stuff that may be challenging (about Islam) and not what they know. This is quite alien, they will get there, but it will take time.*

(Audience member, young woman of South Asian heritage)

A similar view is expressed by young Muslim women regarding the performances of the comedians in the Art of Laughing on the last weekend in Burnley Mechanics. The response of young Muslim women at both these events is that of enjoyment, nuance and interest in the tensions of modern hetero-sexual relationships. However, some people feel that the play is too sexually explicit.

Asif is a young man who hails from Bradford, but through the stories and ideas explored within the play *Love Bombs and Apples* he manages to entwine the local with the international, humorously articulating the distinctions and commonalities between Muslims living in a Western country and the experiences of Muslims elsewhere.

## Commissioning for difference

From the first night in the ACE centre in Nelson until the last night of entertainment in Burnley Mechanics, Kinara was a milieu of local and (inter)national creativity. Some talent came from outside the East Lancashire area. These artists included Lemn Sissay an internationally renowned, poet, novelist, playwright and performer who was born in Billinge and brought up in Lancashire with white foster parents and in various children's homes. Avaes Mohammed is a poet from Blackburn, as was Tez Ilyas, Asif Khan brought up in Bradford went to RADA; the producer of the festival itself, Rizwan Iqbal is from Burnley. Other artists were from elsewhere in the country and/or were international. However, most were either second, or third generation South Asian heritage, or to a lesser extent African/Caribbean or Southern European. Despite significant differences within these communities, both in everyday experiences and faith-based practices, the distinctions

between those born in the UK, locally in Lancashire, or in South Asia had only limited resonance in the festival itself. For the Muslim communities it is their faith, Islam, in a myriad of cultural and ethnic representations, that is of overriding importance in defining their cultural identity.

On the third weekend, Sonia Sabri and her company from Birmingham brought workshops - Sufi whirling, dancing and singing. The evening performance was of Kathak dancing and Persian poetry, classical Indian high culture. By bringing Persian art, Sufi dancing and singing to the festival in a traditional theatre venue in Oswaldtwistle, Sonia combined global and local influences, connecting an *imagined* past with the present and in some ways transcending local distinctions *within* South Asian communities. The global questions the local, yet paradoxically informs it. The milieu of South Asian migrants along the journey of the canal have settled ways of life, infused with local experience, yet are global by virtue of their heritage and immediate familial connections in Pakistan and India. The conversations between the local and global also requires and re-produces the third space.

*The music is beautiful, and the woman is incredible and considering all the nonsense that is going on at the moment, it is really important to get people together ... the music is so deep, so beautiful.*

(white woman in her sixties)

The idea of high Persian and Sufi art bringing people together was expressed by another audience member

*Absolutely excellent performance, yes I am local. Blown away. Absolutely fantastic. In terms of arts and the local community it has got every possibility of bringing lots of different arts factions together in terms dance, performance. Through fine art, spoken word, or a compilation of music and dance... It has got every possibility of uniting people from the outside and from the in, every possibility. I think it is going from strength to strength. Good things through art can touch the community, especially diverse communities. It is meaningful. it is very central, it is very inner, very deep; it is purposeful and I wish it well*

(Asian man in his sixties)

## Outcomes

1. Kinara rekindled the cultural experience of migration for (mainly) Muslim communities of South Asian heritage and white British communities in the same towns by producing art and culture of the highest calibre along the stretch of the Leeds to Liverpool canal that links Nelson, Blackburn and Burnley
2. The festival provided the opportunity to explore a South Asian and Islamic art and culture, alongside other global influences, in both contemporary and traditional ways. In particular, Kinara honoured all that is positive in Islamic culture, in an area where this has not previously been publically funded and profiled. The experiential and symbolic significance for the local Muslim audiences was that of inter-cultural recognition of a heritage of which they could be proud.
3. The festival provided a third space for those in the audience, people of difference, whatever their ethnicity, to encounter and understand one another's cultural

traditions. The interviews expressed appreciation and enjoyment and a sense of common humanity achievable through art.

4. The festival pushed boundaries. In keeping with the meaning of Kinara (*'border, edge, brink, verge, where water meets land'*) the art was often on the border of traditional Muslim values, at times on the edge of respectability, and the verge of being both brilliant and bold. It invited audiences, young and old(er), white, South Asian and/or Muslim people to think about their identities, faiths and values and to question the assumptions behind them, to re-evaluate themselves in the context of their communities and the wider world.
5. It also encouraged people who live in mono-cultural communities, to confront racism, its stereotypes and how it damages lives. By reframing how the Muslim and South Asian communities in Lancashire and across the world are perceived - it challenged both those who follow Islam and those who are antipathetic towards it, to look again and (re) imagine a world where these differences in faith, culture and ethnicity are celebrated.
6. Kinara presented art and culture of extraordinary quality and diversity. It offered a vision of art that was both local and international. It encouraged Muslims, those of other faiths, and none, to think about how the local, national and global shapes their lives. Poets and performers encouraged audiences to think about themselves as people of heritage from Pakistan and Pendle, and everything that is 'theirs' in between.
7. In the context of the programme as a whole, and its remit to provide for all the communities along the canal, Kinara was a much appreciated gesture of symbolic and material importance in establishing credibility and presence for Super Slow Way among the South Asian heritage communities.

## Conclusion

Lancashire has been formed through migration, but has not always felt at ease with it. Kinara came at a significant moment in the febrile post-referendum atmosphere, in a Brexit majority area. It presented a strong view of the richness in the cultural heritage of South Asian/Muslim communities and was an important cultural intervention, even though it may not have been conceived in this way.

*Very overwhelming and insightful experience ...has rejuvenated my hope in humanity when in current times it is hard to have any. Thank you for the experience*  
(Anonymous feedback sheet)

Given the ground-breaking nature of this programme for the people of East Lancashire, that had to build a previously non-existent audience from scratch, we consider that income targets are poor indicators of quality. Audience numbers grew over the course of the month as the festival gained momentum. Given the demographic and cultural history of the area, something of this nature was a very necessary part of the Super Slow Way offer. The Kinara festival needs to be judged by its ambition and contextual significance and its ability to captivate, challenge provoke its audiences. In these terms it succeeded very well.

Kinara brought South Asian and Islamic art, culture and music to East Lancashire for the first time. It represented the flow of people, of culture(s) into the towns and villages and it

demonstrated that those who reside along the canal. A space was opened up for people from the South Asian and white communities - often living very separately within the same geographical area - to enjoy South Asian and Islamic art and culture together, alongside other cultural influences. As we have witnessed in other projects in the programme, cultural distinctions and conflicts are embedded in everyday consciousness in East Lancashire and inter-cultural understanding seems to be very much on people's minds. Audience responses suggested that the festival provided a chance, a hope, that some understanding of a common humanity and appreciation of each other may just begin to emerge through the beauty of cultural difference.

*Enjoyed the evening, nice to hear about the ideas behind the music, like the concept of breaking down barriers – something which is very much needed in this area.*

*The power of the visual representation of the diversity of the Muslim community will help to break down so many barriers*

*Discussions were educational – brilliant panel. I feel more discussions are needed.*

*WE need to break the misconceptions and share our narratives.*

And finally by way of encouragement, there was an overwhelming and repetitive plea for more

*Fantastic! Please don't stop – We won't stop coming!*

# Harkat

## Introduction

The Filipino artist Alwin Reamillo worked with local people in the Burnley area around the Canalside Community Centre in Burnley between mid-August - 7<sup>th</sup> October 2016, which was the date of the final celebration event. The artwork was called 'Harkat', meaning 'movement', a floating sculpture or shrine for the Straight Mile part of the canal in Burnley. The intention was to involve the diverse local community in an art project loosely based around the Filipino 'Bayanihan' tradition. According to Reamillo, Bayanihan is about neighbors helping each other as a community, doing jobs together and easing the individual's workload. It is also called the 'community spirit'. The best example of this, and one that Reamillo has used before, is the moving of the traditional Filipino house, which can be moved using wooden poles which carry the house to a new site. A group of people lift and carry the house on their shoulders. After this, there is always a celebration, which encourages everybody to get together and socialize. In this case the sculpture or shrine was intended to be paraded around the streets prior to its floating on the canal, followed by a community event, which would bring people together.

Reamillo's project was recommended by Action Factory (<http://action-factory.org>) who also supported its production, after Super Slow Way agreed the commission and finance.

## Commissioning process and project management

As part of the SSW mission to promote, develop and involve local community-based organisations, and thus raise capacity in the sector the commissioning process aims to both empower local groups and simultaneously provide support and backup needed for the projects to meet the ambitions and quality criteria of the SSW programme. When working with local organisations, such as Action Factory, SSW, therefore, sees its role as being more than simply that of a funding body, in that its commissioning strategy is guided by a programmatic vision and it is accountable financially and artistically to the wider Arts Council Creative People and Places programme. In order to do this, it works in partnership with organisations that have local knowledge and networks offering them the opportunity to work with artists of their choice. At times it appeared there was a no clear mutual understanding of the respective roles of SSW and Action Factory. This led to an initial blurring of responsibilities and an ambiguity about the extent of the overseeing role of SSW. Local arts organisations may well prefer the arms length connection conferred by a more straightforward funding relationship, and Action Factory was not alone in wishing for greater autonomy in terms of management of the artist's project and control of the budget.

*The contract is not very clear as to what the role of SSW is. We originally saw SSW as the funders. But now it seems there's different extra bits of money for different things and they're quite happy to take over certain things. I'm quite happy to let them take over if it means that they don't take anything out of my budget...*

*... They see that they are managing the project and we see that we are managing the project. We're still feeling our way, we've just started. We're a management*

*company in our own right and we're used to being totally responsible for everything in a project but it seems that they want more hands on than we're used to.*

(Action Factory)

Clearly, the potential and advantages in principle of working with a local group lie in the already established contacts and networks that the group has and its local knowledge and history of working in the area

*We already have links with the community, identified groups, so that he doesn't have all the legwork, we'll be doing all that legwork for him. I will be inviting local artists towards the end of the project to come and work with Alwyn and get some experience of what it's like working on an international level.*

(Action Factory)

In addition, the relationship between Reamillo and Action Factory has been a long-standing one, which made their working together easy:

*The link that brought me here was from the previous engagement with the museum in Blackburn in 2009, I took part in a residency programme, made my connection with Action Factory and I look at this engagement as a collaboration, an on-going collaboration. I had an enriching experience learning about Burnley in that residency, learning about the local history, the history of the industrial revolution...*

(Reamillo)

However, there were tensions over 'quality of engagement', a term used twice by the artist when discussing SSW's role, and implied in Action Factory's discussion of the nature or quality of 'community art'. It seems that SSW were perceived by Action Factory as exercising quality control and this impinged on a trusting relationship, raising questions about who was the final arbiter of 'quality of engagement'. For Action Factory, there was a feeling of being questioned about their commitment to 'community arts':

*It's almost like the word 'community arts' has been downgraded, not fashionable, even though it does what it says. The new word is 'socially engaged practice'. Fine, but such a sweeping brush of what do you mean by socially engaged practice, and under that umbrella you can have someone like Antony Gormley who works with the community but they end up doing what he wants to make so they end up being like factory workers for his own creativity.*

(Action Factory)

Although there was goodwill on all sides, and a desire to succeed, it is clear that this is the kind of tension is potentially present in the three-way relationship between artist, project producer/support agency and commissioning/funding agency which in this case was a programme with its own distinctive profile and artistic vision. The artist himself in his final interview made it clear where the primary collaboration lay as far as he was concerned

*Super Slow Way is a new organisation, it's been recently formed, and I think that's one of the challenges ... We have Action Factory and a lot of arts organisations that have been here for a long time... Super Slow Way is a new bureaucratic layer... Action Factory are my primary collaborators. I rely on their knowledge of their community. We test ideas and I see them as my main collaborators.*

(Reamillo)

His characterisation of SSW as a ‘bureaucratic layer’ reflects a loyalty to the group he knew well and was working with directly, but also a lack of understanding about the nature of Super Slow Way and its wider mission and responsibilities. This brings up the question of whose responsibility it is to brief the artist prior to engagement.

### Working with local people

Even with Action Factory’s support the task of finding community participants and collaborators for Reamillo’s project was far from straightforward. The local Community Centre (Canalside) is a rather run down building with an air of abandonment. In common with other community centres it has little or no support from the Local Authority and is reliant on voluntary efforts – in this case particularly those of an older resident of the neighbourhood. There had been some renovation of the centre and the bank of the canal in 2012, but it was unclear how much local engagement with the Centre had been sustained since then.

## PIC: POSTER INSIDE COMMUNITY CENTRE

### Poster inside the Community Centre describing its promise after renovation

It hadn’t always been like this, and one of the local participants in the 7<sup>th</sup> October celebration event described the Community Centre of her youth as being full of interesting activities such as martial arts classes in which she had participated as a child. There is further need of ‘regeneration’ and Reamillo’s perception emphasises social reasons that go hand in hand with the decline in physical infrastructure

*People feel they can no longer use the space, for whatever reason... It gives me an impression that this was a vibrant community in the past. This area appears to be in decline if you compare it to other areas along the canal. Here it’s more a mixed community...*

(Reamillo)

Both the artist and Action Factory were prepared to do the necessary groundwork to build up engagement. At the very start of the project, according to Reamillo:

*I have to do a lot of walking in the first couple of weeks, knock doors and connect, exchanges with people... I have also been researching the Filipino community in Burnley and found out that there's been a national shortage of nurses and there is a community of Filipino nurses in Burnley... The success of the project is if it makes this kind of connection with people, personal... many levels. I like the work that has been done by Action Factory, they've been here for a long time, in a grass roots kind of way...*

(Reamillo)

However, the difficulty of this task was underestimated, and although some people became involved in the project, it never saw the fuller local engagement that had been hoped for at the beginning. According to Reamillo in his final interview, many avenues of participation were explored –schools, local community, local British Legion (close to Community Centre), Filipino community - but with limited success:

*We've had involvement of St Peter's Primary School ... it's a good connection but uneven... That was a challenge, when you work with different kinds of groups and you only meet them one two three times, it doesn't build up much, major challenge, so we have limited the scope of the activities, ... with smaller kids we made the flowers, invited an artist to help facilitate, and the chimes, a bit of a challenge for the younger kids...*

*We had a community meeting, prepared some food for adults, lit with candles, invited the parents of the children... unfortunately this has happened towards the end of the residency because I've been trying to do that , telling everyone we are open every day, if you are interested just come up and have a chat,*

*Tried in first week to go up the street and got the British Legion in to introduce myself, but it's a bit of a challenge because people say 'yes' but they don't really...*

*We had a big group of Filipino women, friend's network from the market. They came over, they brought food... but the focus of doing the workshop and then the food. It was more the food and socialising, it was later I realised we should have brought some of the workshop, like origami down here, while chatting. In the end the kids were upstairs and the adults were down here. I was hoping that there would be two more workshops, two more Saturdays, but we later realised that the social calendar is a very busy day, the weekend they have parties every time. There is for me a bit of a let down in the participation aspect...*

(Reamillo)

Where Reamillo found the most satisfactory participation was in the refugee and asylum seeker centre in Blackburn, where Action Factory are based:

*A regular group, drop in, good connection, situation in that group some are Muslims, so the space is defined by the men and the women. I tried to create a space for sharing. Different stations of activities, one long table... this happens in Wesley Hall.*

(Reamillo)

Engaging the local community, even where there is supposedly a community centre available, was very difficult in this area, so much so that much of the engagement had to rely



on visits to ready formed groups, such as schools and refugee centres that were not in the immediate locality. Stimulating the local community to volunteer themselves was a tough challenge in the short space of time available to this eight week project.

## PIC: REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS

### Refugees and asylum seekers

#### Refugees working on Harkat on day of the celebration

Most of the refugees who became involved in the project spoke almost no English. The importance of such a project for the refugees themselves was, however, evident from their desire to engage with Reamillo and comments from local refugee and asylum seekers volunteers and leaders. According to a volunteer in Blackburn, the final celebration was 'absolutely brilliant, bringing all the communities together'. For this volunteer, working with the process of an artwork project is particularly valuable for refugees:

*Feelings are running quite high, emotions, what they have gone through, so they have been able to express that in art form, and I'm sure it is helping them mentally as well. Whatever they have got in their mind it shows in their artwork.*  
(Wesley Hall volunteer)

She was also very positive about the final celebration event:

*And they are feeling very comfortable now because they are being surrounded, and I was speaking to one of them now and he said that "I can't believe that I've got a disabled son and back home people wouldn't even touch my skin, if he was dirty they wouldn't and here literally people would come and wipe his nose." It shows how people feel compassionate and feel for these asylum seekers and refugees.*  
(Wesley Hall volunteer)

A representative of the refugee group in Burnley, Building Bridges, was similarly positive about the Harkat as a process and celebration:

*It means a tremendous amount for people to be participating in this kind of event... People coming in these circumstances live on just over £5 a day and therefore their ability to participate in social life is extremely limited, by lack of money, lack of language, and a strange culture, and organising this kind of event is about saying 'you are welcome', 'come and see how we live', 'come and join us'*  
(Building Bridges)

Like the volunteer from Wesley Hall, Building Bridges see art as being especially helpful in their work, especially in engaging younger people and those who speak very little English:

*What's good about an artwork, is that it's a thing of beauty, something completely out of the ordinary, it's exciting for young people. It's easy to engage older people but you have to engage young people in a variety of ways, you've got to be a bit more experiential.*  
(Building Bridges)

In the course of the project, Reamillo visited the centre in Blackburn, and for the final event, Acton Factory organised a bus to take the refugees to the final celebration.

## Engaging with children

### PIC: TABLES OF MATERIALS

#### **Tables of materials ready for transformation in the Community Centre**

Alwin Reamillo's initial concept of the project was very much family based and inter-generational, with the family being the microcosm of one way of understanding community.

*I like cross-generational. If parents can bring kids together, if it creates an opportunity between a parent and a child to work together in a different way. Sometimes the arts are used to kill time, so parents don't have to mind kids. I think it's important to make the connection from the basic unit of family, families with other families, and different networks, connections, the cultural weaving, the social sculpture I am aspiring to.*

(Reamillo)

Much of the engagement from children came from schools, but there were some children who also visited the Community Centre. It was difficult, however, to mix the children with the adults in the way the artist had originally planned, and this was due to the limitations of the restricted time (8 weeks) for the artist to work in a community that was already fragmented. The children I spoke to were clearly enthused with the project, and recognised that even if they weren't 'arty', they found enjoyment in making things. With a small group of enthusiastic children, and especially a committed leader in their ranks, it is not difficult to imagine increasing participation, given time.

### **Final event, 7th October**

The final celebration was the climax of the work and preparation of the previous 8 weeks. It consisted in a procession around through the local streets, carrying 'offerings' to float next to the floating sculpture, which would be welcomed upon its arrival and mooring at the bank, followed by a street meal in the car park adjacent to the Community Centre.

PIC: MAP OF THE PROCESSION

#### **Map of the procession**

The final itinerary was very much reduced from the original plan to have a procession through the streets of the centre of Burnley.

PIC: OFFERINGS

PIC: OFFERINGS

**The 'offerings', prepared in the Community Centre and then carried in the procession**

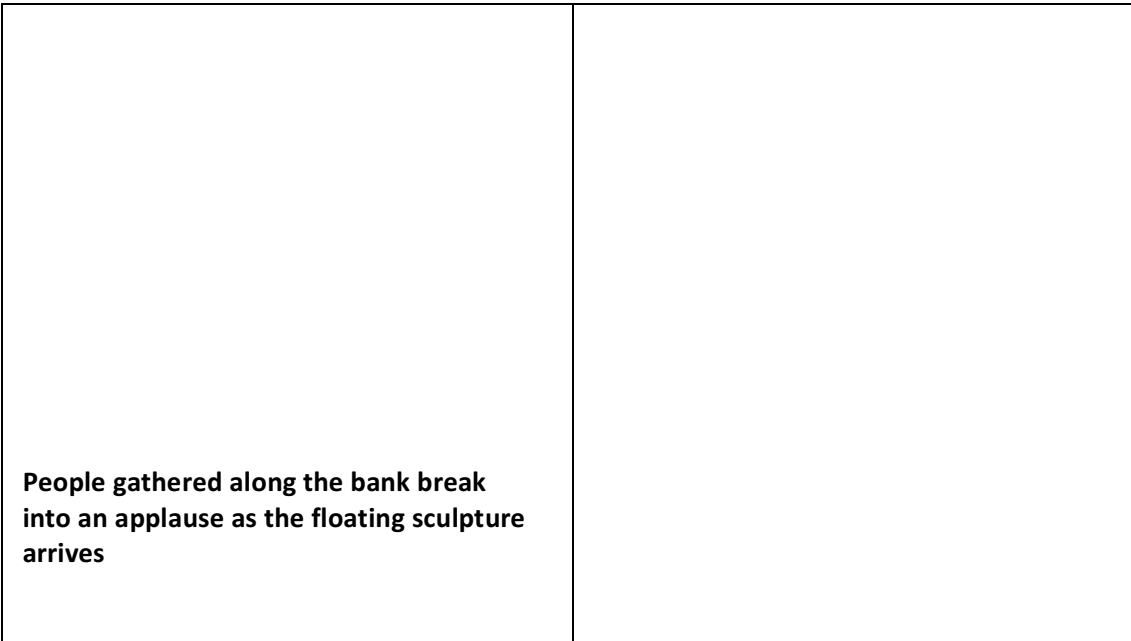
The procession consisted of a mix of people, ages, gender, ethnicity, taking a short walk around the area and gathering along the side of the canal to await the arrival of Harkat. As we were walking through the streets, one of the locals walking past shouted out 'What's this then?' to which one of the walkers replied 'It's community spirit, mate!'. There may have been a hint of irony in his response, as the challenges facing the community centre suggest. However this was an unusual and good-natured event.

PIC: THE PROCESSION  
NEARS THE CANAL

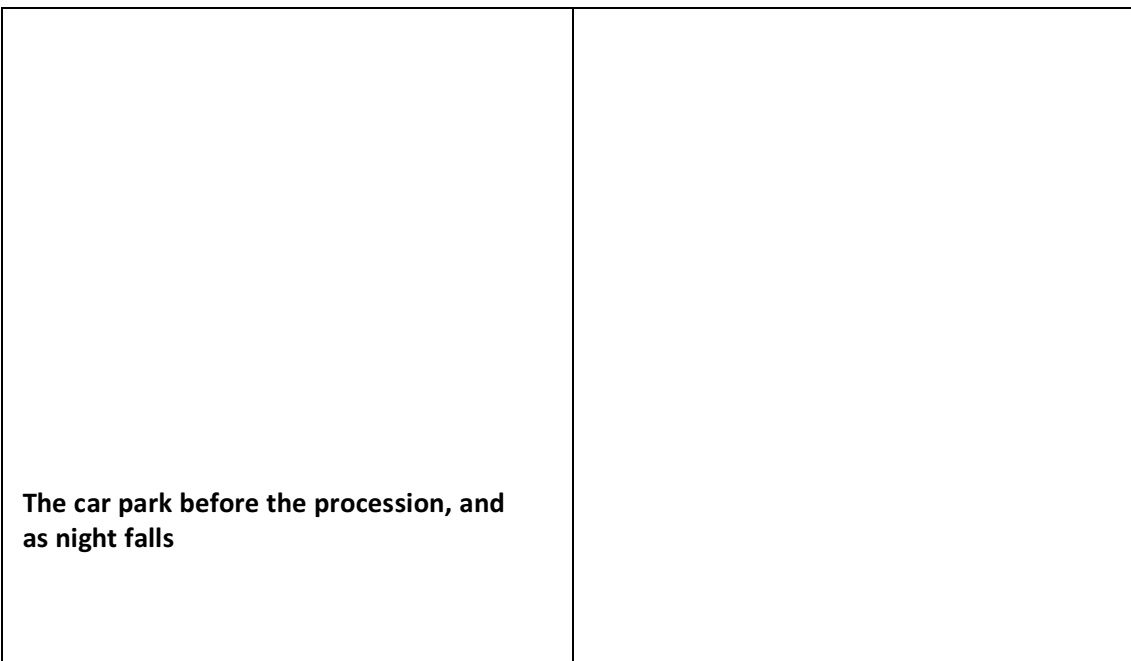
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When the floating sculpture arrived, there was a little outburst of spontaneous clapping from the small crowd gathered along the bank. As night fell, the lanterns and lights began to shine.



People attending the event were then invited to share a meal in the carpark next to the Community Centre.



The event was a pleasant and relaxed moment, where a diverse group of people were able to meet and talk openly to each other. One Muslim man told me that this was the first time he had been to such an event where he could meet others and talk to them about Muslim values and how these were so opposed to terrorism. He was overflowing with a positive sense of being able to meet and talk in that way. A woman who had been born and bred in the area discussed how community had disappeared, but how she remembered it from her childhood. She hoped it would return, but she was doubtful because of Government cuts. I met a couple of Asian young men who were surprised by the event and had no idea that it was on. One of them complained that nobody ever told him about such things, nobody came round with a leaflet or knocked on his door (he only lived in the next street). This in itself shows the low connectivity of the neighbourhood and how few informal channels of communication there are to circulate news about local events; it raises questions about how and when to advertise an artwork and the process leading to its completion and celebration. However, in this final event, Reamillo's desire for a diverse grouping of people from all parts of the 'community', including children and families, was realised.

## Outcomes

1. The original partnership of the artist and the local arts organization, Action Factory, has been consolidated in this further collaboration. This leaves open the possibility of future collaboration.
2. The artwork and process has opened out new perspectives on what appears to be possible – opening out minds on possibility and potential. The aesthetic imagination of Harkat has encouraged a thinking out of the box, the 'box' being represented with the shell of the community centre both as a physical space and a metaphor. People have been stimulated, with young people forming a group and with Asian community leaders seeing new possibilities in getting together to promote community participation in the community centre – an essential merging of interests due to the current heavy dependence on a single elderly person for the maintenance of the centre.
3. The partnership between SSW and Action Factory, which began surrounded in ambiguity, has been clarified and bolstered by the eventual success of the final event.
4. Connections have been made with local communities that have hitherto been invisible – the Filipino community – and with refugees, both local and a little further afield in Blackburn. In particular, the refugee contingent, including volunteers, have been especially appreciative and will be wanting to do all they can to keep up the good will and collaboration.
5. There were many instances of appreciation and even gratitude at the relaxed and joyful celebration event at the end of the residency. This was less true of the engagement during the process of the artwork, although this should be noted in the context of the inherent and deep-seated difficulties that the local area faces. This was evident from all sectors of the local community residents and refugees.
6. The work in residence of Reamillo took shape as a response to the canal and using the canal. The movement and emergence of Harkat along the canal provided a magical moment that was applauded by all the people gathered along the banks. The fact of this success and the outdoor celebration was notable in the contrast with the community centre and its unfrequented rooms. The canal, therefore acquired a significance that seemed relevant and new to many people. It brought out the idea

that communities may be connected by the waterways and there was a subliminal link to the idea of communities accepting peoples from other lands, i.e. refugees.

## Conclusions

An eight week period is too short to establishment of trust and grow the level of community engagement and participation that socially engaged artists aspire to achieve. This is especially so in areas without existing vibrant community hubs and where habits of collective cultural enjoyment have been lost.

Clarity is needed from the start of the project on roles and expectations between arts professionals in the three way relationship between artist, project manager/producer and SSW as the funding and commissioning body with overall programme accountability

Supporting a locally based arts organisation to manage the project builds local capacity and has many advantages in terms of local knowledge and relationships. It may also give rise to tensions over engagement strategies, and competing quality criteria and these have to be actively managed. Since the artist is required to work in and with the community, and is a temporary visitor there needs to be support and communication about how and where to work. In the case of Harkat, the artist was resourceful in building the work in little sections because of the narrow door. However, the Community Centre appeared to have little attraction for the local community and therefore had drawbacks as a site from a social and physical perspective

Established institutions in the area (for example schools, local refugee centre) offer opportunities for rapid engagement, especially in a short-term project. There was also talk of locating the sculpture in the local library where it would have attracted the attention of a ready-made user group.

Most of the work was in fact completed by the artist himself with the help of two people from Action Factory, demonstrating both the difficulty of engagement and the need for strong support when things become difficult. There can be a tension between the desire of the artist for a strong aesthetic outcome in terms of product, and the belief of Super Slow Way that the art lies just as much in the processes of *engagement*. This has been experienced in other projects such as Mill Hill.

Also, in common with other projects, children emerged as a natural focus for engagement but at the risk of narrowing it down the artistic scope and opportunity for a sustainable legacy. It became apparent that many local adults identified art as a children's activity – a means of keeping them occupied for a while.

Commissioning an international artist from the Philippines 'enabled the discovery' that a Filipino community exist in Burnley. Reamillo also considers himself to be a migrating artist, and this was reflected in the involvement of refugees. In the year of the Brexit referendum, and in an area where a large proportion of the population had voted to leave – the warmth and good nature of the participants in the project finale demonstrated that local people

were nevertheless open to an artistic idea that had its origin in a very different culture. The incorporation of a refugee and largely Muslim group in a year when the stigmatisation of such migrants was escalating sharply demonstrated that art can function as a site of inter-cultural encounter even under circumstances where inter-community relations are severely strained.

This last point represents a significant *indicative* outcome of what could have been achieved through a longer-term presence, that is to say the possibility that the artist and community might have pursued the aim of enabling the refugee group and local people to work side by side. It was also an unintended outcome in the sense that the refugee community was invited and their attendance facilitated because of low engagement on the part of the surrounding neighbourhood – it illustrates the resourcefulness of an energetic artist supported by a locally embedded organisation with a will to make something happen by lateral thinking and building on the unanticipated opportunities that arise in the process.

There seemed to be little hope from anyone, amidst general despair over lack of funding, including on the part of Action Factory, that anything might continue to develop after the project. However, this pessimism could be confounded. Reamillo made use of the canal as intended, planting an idea of a floating structure that symbolised the realisation of community. Plans are afoot for Super Slow Way to develop this idea as an artistic re-invention of the carnival tradition transposed from the streets to the waterway, as a creative expression of canalside communities and a means to establish cultural links between them. Herein lies the strength of a programme that is able to build incrementally on small projects that whet appetites for cultural activity, and nourish them with in a larger vision. The challenge for Super Slow Way is to persuade the pre-existing arts organisation in the area to become part of this vision and accept that its realisation must mean an acceptance of the role of Super Slow Way as producer rather than just a funder.



# The Circle of Friends

## Introduction

In many ways the experiences, enjoyment and friendships that evolve between the Circle of friends and those of us who join them are a metaphor for Super Slow Way itself. Although the Circle of Friends have been meeting for eighteen years, Jean McEwan has been working with the group for fourteen months since December 2015. It is the canal from Blackburn to Burnley that breathes life and hope into the relationships that they build, the moments they experience, together, apart, together. The Circle of Friends are like no other group, yet, paradoxically, they are like any other group that you would meet. They are young men and women of South Asian and white British heritage. As a group, they had been meeting for many years as friends, talking, getting to know each other, feeling safe and supported by Yasmin Patel the group co-ordinator. They had been meeting ostensibly as a support group with the backing of Blackburn with Darwen Community CVS because they have either physical or learning disabilities, or mental health difficulties. However, the introduction of Jean McEwan to the group quite literally opened up a whole new world - or a world that was strangely familiar to them, but yet to explore, reflected, photographed and drawn. Their world of Blackburn and Burnley by the canal; a place, in the case of Blackburn where most of them had lived, but which they had never really explored in a meaningful way.

The purpose of the project was to build relationships, talk and sense nature, and all that was around them. Jean intended that the group should experience the joy of being in the moment, aware of themselves and their environment. Most of the group are of South Asian heritage, but some are not. This does and does not matter. They explore and share with each other with Jean encouraging and supporting each person to feel at ease with themselves and everyone else and enjoy the canal as it brings life with it: swans, ducks, canoes and canal boats. The Circle of Friends enjoy the mixture of the modern, the industrial, the built-up towns of Blackburn and Darwen that are their home and the way it is entwined with the countryside of East Lancashire. As Jean explains

*In the early days of the project, my focus was on building relationships with them, getting to know them as individuals and as a group, what they were interested in, what they responded to, what support they might need. My role as an artist working with people is to facilitate, open out, give confidence, suggest possibilities, be open and alert to what is going on - draw out peoples' strengths and interests, nurture their creativity, gently encourage risk taking and move outside comfort zones.<sup>2</sup>*

## Key Informants

As a small community commission the key people in this group were Yasmin, the Circle of Friends from Blackburn, and Jean. The views of Super Slow Way staff have been taken into account. It is vital to experience a group like this to appreciate it and the evaluator therefore accompanied it on a walk.

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<sup>2</sup> Taken from 'Seeing a Bear in the Tree' blog by Jean McEwan

## Experience of the group

Through walking with the Circle of Friends and talking to Jean and the participants, it was possible to gain an understanding of how this group worked and developed and how Jean worked with it to bring about a democratic involvement in deciding what they did and how they did it. Ruth Shorrock explains how Jean in her quiet, unassuming, but creative way, moved the Circle of Friends from being a talking group, to one that walks, explores and has developed a confidence and purpose

*Jean is an amazing practitioner. She is an example of someone who is able to communicate with people and manage her own artistic vision and direction and communicate for the participants' needs. To an outsider it seems like that is a quaint little programme. But actually it is a significant shift. This is a group of people who met in a community centre every week and sat in a room. Now they see themselves as much more than that, they are a walking group. They were really unsure about Jean. There was a big shift, from flower arranging and stuff. They have moved so far, look at [name of participant] narrating for the rhapsody.*

(Ruth Shorrock)

Those who are part of the group, have enjoyed experiences together, developed a sense of themselves, an identity as a group, and have grown in confidence. One young wasable to stand on stage in front of a huge audience at the bi-centenary Rhapsody to the Leeds and Liverpool canal, staged in Blackburn in the autumn of 2016.

## A day out with the Circle of Friends

The group has been on many walks around East Lancashire, around their home town of Blackburn, to Manchester and to the Lake District. An example of such a walk is one that took them from Sandygate where the Super Slow Way office is located to the Exbury Egg at Finsley Gate Wharf. They walk slowly, taking in the relentlessly flowing water, the small things that are different, sharing amongst each other and with people who have joined them for the walk. Jean talks warmly, smiling, cajoling, encouraging people to be themselves, to be proud of who they are, and what they do, what they want in life.

There were seven of the group on this particular walk, five of Pakistani/Muslim heritage and two who were white. They walk as friends irrespective of their different ethnicities, culture or background. Yet, the differences are also part of the backdrop to this experience and whilst they walk they talk of cultural distinctions and move beyond them, sharing small anecdotes with each other about their respective backgrounds, and familial, cultural and religious traditions.

*We have not set out to talk about their culture and ethnicity, but it has definitely happened. They like each others' company, they share stuff about their culture and background, but not in an overt way, in a slow incidental kind of way.*

(Jean McEwan)

When they are working in this group, it is their everyday lives, friendship and small experiences that matter. Their ethnicity and culture, whilst of passing interest, is something that has been transcended. They have more in common, than difference, their enjoyment of living, sensing and experiencing the moment and all that it offers on the walks.

Jean explained that those who were in this group, were supposed to have learning difficulties, but as she talked and included the Circle of Friends co-ordinator Yasmin Patel in the discussion, she re-affirmed that they do not see themselves as different, or having special needs, but as people, as friends. Jean had handed out small cameras and encouraged people to take photos of anything that was of interest to them and write down anything on a notepad that seemed different, exciting, or that captured their imagination. They were a friendly open group, and I felt very welcome and at ease in their company.

#### **Example - Meandering**

The group talk about the smell of nature, the canal, sensing and hearing the birds around them, and they scribble notes of all their sensory experiences and feelings. A canal boat chugs by, the man steering the boat waves. The group reciprocate his warm greeting. A fire engine in the distance, birds singing, geese gagging, swans elegantly, yet menacingly, glide to the side of the canal where we are walking. We wonder whether swan are dangerous, or not. We have all been told this haven't we? That they are strong and angry enough to break your arm? Is this true? A discussion ensues.

Pictures are taken of factories, flowers and fire engines. It is a serene experience of attending and noticing. We stay in the present. It slows you down. We walk as far as the site of the Exbury egg. Jean offers people the choice to continue walking, or turn around and walk back at a faster pace. All say that they want to turn around and return home now. Some are worried about the time, some tired, some hungry. A young Asian man, slim angular with glasses, informs me that he has enjoyed this walk and that had been on a similar walk along the canal stretch in Blackburn. Unlike here, which is clean and well preserved, in Blackburn there were lots of shopping trolleys, rubbish and litter in the canal. People had used it as a tip, almost. A perceptive, thoughtful reflection. Time, Space and slowly appreciating Place, this is the Circle of Friends' experience of walking along the canal.

The magic of this group, the art, is in its everydayness, the ordinariness of the experience. They have developed relationships of trust, of friendship enjoying and experiencing life's journey together and now they have a renewed confidence to explore life further.

*It was important that people in the group felt that they could do what they wanted to do, at their own pace, and to experience and share things as they saw them. That could be talking about the birds, or the ducks and the swans on the canal, or to walk around where they lived and in Blackburn and experience it in a different way.*  
(Jean McEwan).

#### **Future hopes**

This project has been experienced by all those in Circle of Friends, by Jean herself and by Super Slow Way as a success. It is a good example at a very local level of the participants being actively, and democratically involved in the co-production of the art. The art arises out of the everyday experience of the participants in this project, sharing their lives, taking photos, collecting small artefacts and creating something new and unique out of them.

*You have gone from this idea from an artist who comes in and does a sculpture, to something much more fluid. There is an example of co-production, they are making art together. They are equal partners and are now working as partners to put in bids*

*for further development of their group. They are inviting people in to join them in their walking group, now that is massive. That is legacy.*

(Ruth Shorrocks, Super Slow Way)

The group now decide and initiate many of the activities. They have discovered an identity that is unique, that is theirs and that empowers the choices that they make. Many of these will still be walking and experiencing, and some will be with Jean. But they are beginning to do so on their own.

*The most successful projects have been the ones where there has been enough time to build a natural relationship with people where they are living amongst each other and they are not set with an agenda.*

(Ruth Shorrocks, Super Slow Way)

## Outcomes

Through forging these relationships with each other and the environment the Circle of Friends have contributed to the following outcomes:

1. By using the canal as the focus for many of their walks and activities the Circle of Friends have shone a spotlight on it as a place of leisure and a cultural space to enjoy.
2. The group have recorded their experiences of their walks through writing notes, drawing, photography, audio and film recordings. From these recordings they have created artistic magazines for others to use as a map and information for their walks along the canal.
3. Through providing guided tours for people on the launch of the SSW programme and on other occasions they have linked up cultural areas of interest – such as the redeveloped leisure area of Sandygate with the Exbury Egg further along the canal at Finsbury wharf.
4. The group has made the canal their own and developed an identity with and of it. They are local people from Blackburn brought up by the canal, but now it is theirs, it belongs to them, and them to it. This sense of ownership of place breathes confidence and hope into the group.
5. The group has shown that cultural and ethnic barriers can be overcome through personal relationships formed in the course of an art project and these can be facilitated through an organic experience of art, in the third space, that emerges when people are experiencing and being as well as doing.
6. The group have highlighted the beauty of canal-side nature and of the old industrial towns that it knits together. Inadvertently, they have shown that the water, and all that is around it has a unique heritage of its own. The Circle of Friends have lived and grown in that symbiosis between the canal and the communities it serves.
7. The group have shown how migrants, people from Pakistan, South Asian and lately Eastern Europe become, over time, one in the same. The walks along the canal with people of difference and similarity, like the water keep changing, slowly steadily, over time, all part of natural flow of humanity that through its work and play has made East Lancashire.

## Conclusion

This project, focusing on the needs of a very particular group of people with disabilities is striking at first sight for its particularity and intimacy, an ideal context for the practice of 'slow art'. However, the group has been far from insular and it highlights the potential of the canal as a conduit for developing relationships between the communities themselves, South Asian people, white people, new migrants from Europe as it flows through the old industrial mill towns and countryside. This has been a very contained, cared for by the artist who has enabled them to enjoy the canal in a particular way as it flows by people, buildings, roads. It brings them a tranquillity that is one at the same time, serene and liberating. There is no need for conflict when time just drifts by, into space, everything will always be the same, yet different, with the slow movement of the waters inviting people to stop, stare and wonder.

## Hugging the Canal

### The project

Jen Reid is a singer and performer of traditional folk and mill songs of Lancashire, who has also had a significant role in Sounds of Water, Shapes of Hope. She conceived the idea of walking the canal and 'singing for her supper', by singing traditional Lancashire songs at pubs and inns along the way. In exchange for the artists' 'wares', the pubs and inns would offer food and accommodation for the night. Super Slow Way paired Jen with artist Simon Woolham, partly to ensure better support and safety along the canal for both of them and partly to introduce a visual record of the journey. Simon was making drawings along the way and creating badges out of brass rubbings taken of various sites along the canal. These would be given to people on the way as part of the project Simon called 'wearing the canal'.

#### **Example of one of Simon Woolham's rubbings badges made in the course of the walk along the canal.**

PIC

They undertook to do 15 miles a day. Unfortunately – and as an indication of how times have changed – it is no longer possible to 'sing for your supper' partly because the pubs are owned by big breweries, and partly because the 'bar restaurant concept' establishments were not in a position to be interested. Jen and Simon ended up wild camping at the side of the canal instead. However, Jen did manage to sing to people in 14 pubs along the way.

For Jen, singing can be a means of giving people an opportunity for self-expression:

The idea was to keep singing in cultural consciousness. Anyone can do it, it's not just X Factor. It's fine to just sing, it's enjoyable.  
(Reid)

## Super Slow Way context

### PIC: REID INSPECTING

In the context of SSW's Shapes of Water, Sounds of hope project, it is interesting to note the use of music, specifically singing, as a means of bridging cultural divides. Hugging the Canal attempted to join locations along the canal that currently have little sense of connection and are in themselves quite different. Moving along the line of the canal brought them together in a single artistic vision.

The reaction in the pubs along the canal was varied, with some pubs being more welcoming than others.

**Jen Reid inspecting Anthony Schrag's 'Ship of Hope' during a break in her Hugging the Canal' project, next to a sign depicting the canal and tow path.**

This relatively low key attempt to weave together the different areas of the canal and its communities into a single project illustrated some the challenges and questions thrown by Super Slow Way's ambition to link up the canal corridor as a cultural space.

The itinerant nature of the projects meant that at no point was there a sense of place and ownership (except that of 'owning the canal', so to speak), nor time for development. The nature of Jen Reid's art is ephemeral in the sense that it leaves behind no physical legacy. However, feedback from the artists was positive. They talked of generosity and friendliness of people along the canal and comments from some that did suggest openness to envisioning the canal as a single 'place', but this vision will have contend with the fact that many of the canalside communities are settled and local identities may be built on a sense of being apart from others.

A small project like this is a form of ethnographic inquiry in its own right potentially affording an intimate knowledge of the challenges and opportunities in pursuing Super Slow Way's vision. Its legacy cannot easily be 'measured' or documented. But this is not to gainsay its value. Apart from the pleasure it gives in the moment, in the context of the programme it potentially has incremental value if it becomes one of a gathering number of initiatives that together and over time animate the canal as a social space – planting ideas and raising expectations.

Simon was able to show passers by how to make brass or embossed rubbings along the way and to convert these into badges that he could give away as part of the project. He also created sketches on his ipad of scenes along the canal as a kind of mapping project.

## Outcomes

1. This was a small-scale, low-intensity project that engaged people in pub settings on an impromptu basis through singing and showing that where audiences were receptive it was possible to engage them and animate pub spaces with informal songs from a traditional repertoire rooted in the history of the area
2. It provided an opportunity to spread the word about larger-scale Super Slow Way sponsored singing activity – in particular, Sounds of Water, Shapes of Hope that was working towards its autumn climax.
3. It demonstrated the extent to which traditional and modern style pubs vary in their receptiveness to interventions of this nature. In this way, the project also speaks to the idea of community and place and provoked the question about the nature of community and whether a ‘community could be understood as a ‘canalside’ community.
4. The badge-making left a people with small mementos of the event.
5. A link was created – conceptually at least – between the segments of the canal through which the pair walked, and this idea was shared with audiences as Jen and Simon explained their presence and purpose.
6. The project highlighted the tow-path as a walking experience

## Conclusions

This was an experimental project – it is an example of the kind of small scale, low intensity cultural animation that could potentially enliven the canal – not just for the pleasure it gives the moment, but as part of an incremental build of activity that enable people to begin to see the canal as a cultural and leisure space. It also contributes to developing ideas, concepts and plans for future Super Slow Way commissions. Whether or not it achieves this in any lasting sense depends on further follow on activity.

The project poses interesting questions. Initially, it was supposed to be part of the Burnley Canal Festival, but it seems to have developed into its own project. The main issue it highlights is whether and how the canal can be liked up as a cultural heritage site, in line with Super Slow Way’s future ambitions, starting from a series of largely unconnected (except by the canal) communities who live along it at present. It revealed and emphasised the surprising differences between communities along the way, a difference that has been remarked on by some of the other artists, recalling, for example, Schrag’s project title, the ‘Island of Mill Hill’.



## Verd de Gris

### Introduction

*She is no longer afraid and ashamed. She dances alone to her own tune<sup>3</sup>*

This is an overview of the development of the work undertaken by Verd de Gris with the volunteer carers from Blackburn and Darwen carers service. It explains the success of the initial volunteer carers' project that led to a second volunteer carers' project called *Through the Door* being set up and the subsequent launch of the Box of Poetry to celebrate the carers' creative work. Verd De Gris were commissioned by Super Slow Way as a small scale community commission project to work with volunteer from Blackburn and Darwen carers service in an artistic and creative way. The project was run in partnership between Verd De Gris, Super Slow Way and Blackburn with Darwen Carers' Service. The work of is led by Sharon Marsden and took place in a relatively small room in Kingsway house in Blackburn. The project involved working predominantly Muslim women of South Asian heritage sharing their experiences of caring, of living, of hoping for themselves and their loved ones. The aim of Verd de Gris was to work with the carers enable them to express their feelings, share their emotions, and support each other through their experiences of caring. Marsden explains that the project is in essence a creative well-being experience, through art, which aims to enable carers to experience a freedom, enjoying and exploring possibilities in their lives. Those who she works with are living, or caring for people who have mental health difficulties, or dementia. Sharon has used many forms of expression to try to capture the feelings and emotions of the carers who attend the sessions.

*It is the creativity that is the driving thing, obviously with compassion and sensitivity .  
[they] have shown that it can be delivered  
(Sharon Marsden)*

### Process and model of engagement

At beginning of the commissioning process, Verd De Gris explained that they worked within communities and with individuals who experience dementia, through

*Expansive ideas that invite debate, experimentation and emotional engagement – and it is central to our artistic philosophy that everyone who works with us is encouraged to engage with the idea, with each other, and with the work produced.*

*We work in diverse environments and tackle a range of issues and concerns; social fracture, intergenerational drift, dementia; our project formats are tightly wrought and turn on big, fundamental principles like: place, migration, prayer, love and aspiration. But it is our underlying artistic vision and faith in art as a catalyst for*

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<sup>3</sup> Taken from Box of Poetry Verd de Gris

*engagement and change that allows us to get the results that we do . . . pushing of boundaries of what is possible in our work: of combining dance, drama, storytelling, installation, sound-art, sensory reminiscence.*<sup>4</sup>

In the process of evaluating this project participant observations were undertaken, Verd De Gris were interviewed, the volunteer carers who attended the session provided verbal and written evaluations as did the Super Slow Way staff.

### **Creative and cathartic**

The essence of Verd De Gris is that, through working with Sharon Marsden, people are given the chance to grow, to express and rediscover what she describes as “their inner beauty”. This is achieved in very small stages with the carers through the use of art, music and creativity to build up their confidence in the process. When working with a group of predominantly South Asian carers Sharon uses dance, music, poetry and painting to develop a sense of identity and also to develop the group as a small supportive community.

*My way of working is always a very creative process. So it is thinking about how you get the best out of people. It goes in stages. You have to enable people to feel comfortable enough that what they have to say what is worth hearing... and once you do that, then it opens up and you get pieces of poetry through people*  
(Sharon Marsden)

It is a slow deliberate process that gives the carers the opportunity to grow into the group, the process and the experience.

*I tend to open up through asking questions. What makes you happy? What gives you peace? So that gives them the confidence to know the answer and write a word on a piece of paper. Then I do a process called stream of consciousness writing, I do a prompt to draw out whatever is in somebody's mind. That is carefully thought about whatever that prompt may be... it may be encouraging them to sing, a particular movement, a particular art activity. The basis of all of this is that it is not an art class, so nobody fails... the art work that is produced is beautiful and could be hung in any gallery.*  
(Sharon Marsden)

The basis of the Marsden's work is that everybody has potential, beauty and creativity within them that only needs to be realised in way that they feel is comfortable. To give them permission to share, often very slowly and tentatively, small parts of themselves with herself and the group, often very slowly and tentatively. Often they share experiences of being a carer for a relative who has developed dementia, or has had mental health difficulties.

### **Example**

The carers meet on a regular basis at Kingsway house in Blackburn. On one such occasion they were joined by a white British married couple, as the husband had

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<sup>4</sup> Taken from Verd de Gris Commissioning Proposal

recently developed dementia. The husband explained to the group how he was working and suddenly developed feelings of disorientation, confusion, loneliness and panic. The group confirmed that this was a common experience of the onset of dementia and the couple were welcomed and included as the group went through their various activities. These commenced with relaxation exercises, arm stretching, soft gentle music and slow dancing in a circle. The ambience created was almost spiritual, it was intimate and trusting within the group of carers.

Two songs then followed. One was sung by Marsden leading and facilitating, to evoke thoughts of hope and possibility. The other, by one of young South Asian carers was a South African song that means hope (phonetically, the sound was ELUMA . . . Y E A . . . ELUMA). The rhythm of the tune was contagious and could be sung as a fast dance, or more slowly. All present were encouraged to stand up to sing and dance with the young woman who was leading the song. The singing and dancing changed in tempo and was slow at first, then fast, then slow again. It seemed that the young South Asian woman who took the lead with this activity had taken ownership of the song. It was part of her identity in the group, and inspired confidence in her and others in the group. The spirit of the song lifted her and the others in the small gathering and in many ways seemed to demonstrate the essence of their group. This was creative art through voice and movement, that was co-produced as art and empowered volunteer carers to lead and direct the activities. This is significant as it is this confidence to lead and co-produce art that formed the foundation for the subsequent Through the Door Project.

Marsden used poetry to encourage the carers to express how they felt and she encouraged the group to write a poem from their thoughts, ideas and dreams. She had a flip chart and asked each of the group to contribute a line for the poem, in a spontaneous, organic and unforced way. It was natural, people in the room wanted to contribute. She intended that it should be poetry "from the mind and the soul".

*Sometimes in our lives -  
When times are hard and the road is up ahead.  
Stop and take a breath  
Take time to look and listen and feel  
What's in your heart  
and the whispers filling your soul.  
Wishes are for those who dream  
Love fills our heart  
Tomorrow is another day!  
When reality becomes one and  
Dreams come alive in our wishes  
Swim in a stream of life!*

Those present in the room found the poem, uplifting. It is their poem. By working with this group in a way that engendered, confidence and trust and genuine affection between each other and herself, Marsden helped some of the carers develop with a view to their taking the lead in a future project called Through the Door

#### **Example 2. Through the Door**

This project also took place in Kingsway House and was led by two of the South Asian carers with Sharon in the background facilitating the activities, but not leading them. The project was created as a result of the initial commissioned project being successful in enabling two of the South Asian volunteer carers to feel confident to lead the creative

and well being sessions themselves. The aim of the project was to train up volunteers to deliver creative well-being sessions in the local communities of Blackburn and Darwen. The project involved similar activities, including art, poetry, song and dance and those that attend were mainly carers of South Asian heritage. After the first session which was led by the two Asian carers they provided this feedback on the process

*As I sat back and watched the group write, putting pen to paper, creating some art, listening to poetry and moving to music, I realised how powerful creativity is in expressing oneself. I felt privileged watching expression in another way. For me it's always been talking, maybe it was the only way I'd been heard and received at times. I've always wrote poetry but never shared it. I realise now that it's the sharing with the reader that allows creative expression to be received. That's the process I saw in the group. One question, one answer on paper, then the sharing allowed more open deeper expression. I have no doubt that next week the level of creative expression will be more meaningful, deeper and personal for the members of the group.*  
(Asian carer/group leader)

The co-facilitator, also of South Asian heritage stated

*To run such a powerful session using poetry and art for creativity, I felt confident as a group leader in knowing my role and what I needed to do if at any time a group member would feel the emotions, to know to go with it, judge it and listen. For me, that was the important part, to listen... it may have felt scary and they may have felt anxiety, so I knew this would come and to allow them to express their emotions through creativity, through their own emotions and give them a space to release them. For me to see how the group was connecting, listening and expressing their emotions, be it in the writing or art activity, it was amazing to see how the dynamics of the group had connected and come together, I could see a change. There were moments where a group member had tears, and I was moved by this and felt that this session is just what they needed, that for them they need to be heard and they need to know someone is there listening, that for me as a group leader is saying to them that it's okay, and they know it's okay to express their emotions.*  
(Young south Asian carer)

Through the Door had provided the space for two of the volunteer carers from Blackburn and Darwen carers' service to lead the artistic activities with the carers themselves. To co-facilitate working with the group and to provide a cathartic and therapeutic space through art to enable the carers to feel safe to express their feelings. These thoughts and feelings included the struggles of being a carer for a loved one with mental health difficulties, or dementia. They expressed the difficulties of being women in a closed, tight knit Muslim community in Blackburn that provided little space for independent thought that differs from traditional Islamic values. Being a woman also meant balancing competing relationships and demands in their lives. As one of the participants in the session explained

*I do think that if the Carers Service had been, or could be more on board, this project could go so much further. The buy in from the volunteers is really strong. Through many conversations during the last 8 months within my group (who are mainly Muslim women) it has highlighted such a stigma and lack of understanding (for lots of complex reasons) within the Muslim community around Dementia and Mental Health. I*

*don't think my skills and knowledge in these areas have been fully utilised - there is a lot that could be done to tackle this.*

(Carer Volunteer)

Through the workshops with Sharon Marsden and Verd De Gris, and the subsequent series of sessions led by the two South Asian carers in Through the Door, the difficult and sensitive issues of mental distress, and how it is experienced within the local community and the carers' experiences were explored.

## Shame and hope

*And let go of the boat you made  
Watch it sail  
With all your dreams<sup>5</sup>*

Through the Door culminated with the launch of the Verd De Gris Poetry Box which documented the art, poetry, prose and inspiration. As explained about the volunteers by Verd De Gris in the introduction to the Poetry Box,

*They came as volunteers – to find ways to give something back to the community in which they live. At the end of their journey they have also learnt that through creativity, it is possible to find and celebrate your own unique voice, to be able to 'heal' parts of yourself and rejoice in the beauty of humanity.<sup>6</sup>*

Verd De Gris explain how the South Asian volunteers had travelled from being participants in this creative journey to co-facilitating and leading the group. Providing space for the volunteers to co-produce the art and over time democratically take control and to lead the process.

*But what has been a joy, is to see this group of people embrace uncertainty, welcome the challenge, and take the essence of this creative methodology into their own lives and into the volunteering work that they do. They now use creativity to inspire others as they themselves have been inspired.*

When the Through the Door project had come to an end which culminated in the launch of the Box of Poetry, the volunteers addressed the issue of shame and mental health in South Asian/Muslim community.

- *I wanted to address it at the launch about mental health within the Asian community. The shame and the barriers and how that needs to be addressed, so talking about my own brother I wanted it to hit home and the reality of it, so that people can come forth and not be ashamed to talk about it.*

(Co-facilitator/volunteer)

- *Never thought I would be sat in Starbucks with my brother, sipping on cappuccinos or muffins and reading the poetry box together, it is with me*

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<sup>5</sup> Taken from the *Box of Poetry* by Verd de Gris

<sup>6</sup> Taken from the Introduction to the *Box of Poetry* by Verd de Gris

*everywhere. I found it wonderful how words brings people closer together, a connection is made and that's exactly what I experienced in the group sessions with you and when we lead the sessions.*

(Co-facilitator/volunteer)

This provided an opportunity for a mixed audience of South Asian and white British people to discuss the issue of mental health and shame in the Asian community. The forum provided a platform for those with less power to express their views, and those with some to listen and respond. This included Councillor Hussain Aktar and his daughter. The poem at the beginning of this section perhaps is a metaphor for the women of South Asian heritage to feel that at last, despite their circumstances as carers, and loneliness as women in that role, they can at last begin to dream and believe.

## Outcomes

1. Marsden created a legacy for creative well-being work through training some of the carers to have the confidence and spirit to lead the *Through the Door* Sessions with the volunteer carers.
2. Through the use of creative methods Marsden enabled the carers to co-produce a legacy of art in the form of poetry, dance, painting, drawing and photography. Marsden developed a sense of trust and safety within the room for the Muslim women to talk about issues of gender and mental distress within the group. In particular, providing the space for women to talk about restrictions for them within the Muslim community and within their faith.
3. Marsden provided a democratic forum for the carers/volunteers to take control of the process by encouraging their ideas for artistic and creative expression and in due course, to lead the group sessions.
4. Through addressing sensitive issues with women within the South Asian community Sharon and Verd de Gris encouraged cross cultural participation. Women of South Asian heritage and those who were white British were able to discuss taboo subjects and understand each other's position in their respective communities.
5. The Box of Poetry is a beautiful, creative, artistic legacy to the participation of all those in the group session and the subsequent session of *Through the Door*.

## Conclusion

Although most of the group were of South Asian/Muslim heritage Verd De Gris encouraged cross-cultural understanding through discussing with carers the commonality in their experiences with regard to caring for people with dementia or mental health difficulties. Verd de Gris have worked with the volunteer carers since the start of the projects in a way that encourages their identity, their hopes, their being to flourish. She has helped them to realise through art, dance, singing, poetry and painting that they can find a way to express their emotions and their dreams. The projects have given a voice to those often most ignored, the volunteer carers of people suffering from dementia and mental distress. These women of South Asian and white British heritage have walked *Through the Door* and very slowly, day by day, realised that they can grow in confidence, feel a pride in themselves and the very big things that they each have achieved.

# Men Who Care

## Introduction

Men Who Care was a social group set up for male carers by William Titley supported by carer Marc Jackson, emanating from an idea inspired by the carer's charity Carer's Link in April 2016. Carer's Link's mission is to provide wide ranging support, guidance and advice for carers – people who care for their loved ones and relatives in various situations of disability – and in particular to organise events to give the carers a break from the daily activities of caring which can be emotionally and physically exhausting. Diane Flynn, from Carer's Link ([www.eastlancscarers.org.uk](http://www.eastlancscarers.org.uk)) explained how having noticed publicity for the Super Slow Way project Idle Women she contacted them about the possibility of doing something for Carer's Link and they put her in touch with Super Slow Way. In the ensuing dialogue, Diane explained how Carer's Link had encountered great difficulty in organising day trips or events for male carers who were rarely interested in activities that were either interpreted as 'feminine' by the men – such as crafts or a day shopping trip to Liverpool – or run by women. As a result of these discussions, William Titley was commissioned to begin a men's group for carers which would

*... give men the opportunity to meet like-minded people, share stories, skills and experiences while collaborating with William to explore what it means to care in the world today.*

(William Titley, publicity leaflet)

## Male carers

Full time caring was described as a source of anxiety and in some circumstance shame for men placed in this position

*You don't go to your friends at the pub, you get laughed at and ridiculed... My friends all work and they are all manual labourers. They talk about work like it's the hardest thing on earth. We can't relate and I find myself isolated.*

(Male carer)

This sense of caring being woman's work, as are the activities that Carer's Link are used to organising, leads to male carers being marginalised and hard to reach:

*Getting male carers to come in is very difficult, so a male artist is helpful, if it's run by a lady there's less chance of guys coming to do something. Male carers are very reluctant especially northern blokes, they like more practical things.*

(Carer's Link)

*Carer's Link ... organise days out, and different groups, holistic things, like reiki, yoga, therapy, shopping trips, and that's not geared to us... as a carer I don't want to go to Liverpool shopping. No meaning to me.*

(Male carer)

One of the principal aims of the project, therefore, was to cater for the special needs of male carers.

### Artist's brief

The artist's brief was to provide an alternative male group that would cater for this gap in the provision. This included flexibility in meeting times, with the group membership changing from meeting to meeting, and changing times to suit the carers' availability.

The original project suggestion from Carer's Link was for the group to build a shed where they could make things. Titley, however, was able to begin with shared social activities to build trust and relationships. For example, the first meetings consisted of a fish and chip meal together, a trip on a barge, a game of bowls, all of which were intended to create common ground between men who would not normally have never met or found anything in common. The men remarked, for example on the age differences, ranging from 36 to 81, and their delight in finding an opportunity to meet and seek common ground

*Me and the others we would never have spoke, totally different backgrounds, different age group...never have crossed paths apart from this group.*  
(Male carer)

### Development of the project

Through the establishment of trust and dialogue, Titley was able to change minds and hearts about the nature and use of art, and through this shifting perspective was able to introduce the creativity needed to transform the group away from a commonplace quasi-therapeutic group to one where the men's personal endeavours could change course and find expression in art:

*William has opened my eyes to the fact that art can be anything that you want it to be and that everyone is an artist potentially Seeing the community as an art project and seeing people as your art is more rewarding because you are making a difference to people's lives...*

*The art bit has made it interesting and given us an actual project to work towards, and not turning to a counselling session... the art gives us something to focus on... The project gives structure to the group. The art itself will reach so many people, more than a painting stuck on a wall.... With this you become immersed in it as soon as you get here.*  
(Male carer)

By guiding the group towards this shift of perspective, Titley was able then to create a third space of creativity where the standard idea of a 'shed' became a gentleman's old-fashioned wardrobe, complete with shelves and labels for 'socks', 'ties', 'cufflinks', which was converted into a place where people could be invited to enter and sit and listen to male carers' stories.



## PIC:ARTIST

**Artist, William Titley, sits inside the wardrobe.**

The wardrobe was planned to go on tour in the local area, and passers by would be invited to sit inside and listen to the men's stories.

Another artefact created by the men was a kind of display box, the inside of which could be accessed by gloves. Inside this box, people would be invited to experience the anxiety and experience of male carers' activities. For example, making a cup of tea with the gloves on as a way of feeling the sensation of a carer attempting to make a cup of tea in the middle of the night for the person being cared for.

**'Fumbling' like a carer**

*The feelings and messages you get as you are experiencing it... That's the art, each person puts their arms in and then have a different thought process... some people try to race, some people stop and think and work it out, the art is the reaction and if people are going to go home and talk about it...*

(Male Carer)

PIC: 'FUMBLING LIKE A CARER'

The difference that these 'third space' objects make to the group was described by another carer in the following terms

*This is entirely different, putting a bit of humour in it in a serious situation, to look at the light-hearted side of things. Bounce problems off carers, meet people with similar experiences. Sharing it with people who know nothing about carers. You'd expect to meet people in the caring role but this will attract all sorts of people. People are going to come and look, "what's going on here"?*

### *(Male Carer (2))*

Such observations bring out on the one hand the need for a male carer's group that changes perspectives, that does not always focus on the medical and problem solving side of carers' work; and on the other hand the excitement and desire to communicate male carer experience to the general public, and clearly the men saw art as being a means of achieving this. Through doing so, the men were given motivation to look into their lives and to creatively seek ways to communicate this. It was also pointed out that the focus on art in this group was not detrimental to other aspects of help and support that other, more traditional, groups can offer. One of the carers describes the uplifting experience of the group as providing motivation to turn his personal life around

*Fred, who's 81, and all his experiences, made me realise that some people had a worse time. I have lost 3 and half stone, I was struggling doing everyday tasks, but this gave me motivation to lose weight, I gave up smoking...*

(Male Carer)

## Outcomes

1. Despite the enormous difficulties inherent in the task of gathering together a regular group of male carers, the men who did participate were enthusiastic about the difference between this group, and the way it was conceived by Titley, and other carers' groups.
2. The artistic element of the group opened the men's eyes to the meaning of 'art' beyond the painting on the wall and engaged them in creative practices in ways that were entirely new to them.
3. The engagement and commitment of a local artist was described as essential by Carer's Link. This was corroborated by the bonding that occurred between artist and carers, (such as being able to authentically attend the local football match).
4. The group was able to imagine bringing their experiences out to the public, via the travelling artwork, rather than remaining enclosed in the world of carers' problems.
5. The men we spoke to were keen and concerned to continue the legacy of the group after Titley's departure, but were worried that they would not be able to find the funding to do so.

## Conclusions

The Men Who Care project demonstrated a potentially successful way of engaging with male carers that fills a gap in the provision for carers, which was the primary concern of Carer's Link. This was a small scale project with touching, high quality outcomes, both in terms of quality art and social engagement. In this case, it was clear that Titley's form of engagement with the male carers was a unique experience for the men and completely fulfilled the Carer's Link brief. In terms of numbers, the project only managed to consistently engage

four male carers. This should not detract from the quality and uniqueness of the experience for those men. The project should rather be regarded as a 'pilot' – a small experiment in using art with a group who already had considerable demands placed upon them and who by virtue of gender expectations were awkwardly and ambivalently placed within a carer's support network. The four demonstrated that practical and emotional inhibitions in using art to think about their situation and to build up a supporting network of contacts among male carers could be overcome, demonstrating a potential that is yet to be fully realised, but which this project demonstrates is both possible, desired, and necessary.