



**PSYCHOSOCIAL RESEARCH UNIT**

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

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**PART 3**

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## Contents

<b>PART 3 TWO MAJOR CASE STUDIES .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Shapes of Water, Sounds of Hope .....</b>	<b>3</b>
Introduction: Inter-cultural practice and civic engagement through art.....	3
Key Participants .....	3
Research Methods.....	4
Themes: community conversations, chant, song and film .....	4
Brierfield Mill: symbolic significance of an iconic building .....	5
Local and international.....	6
Cultural regeneration and social capital: long-term perspective, scale and ambition .....	7
Action research and aesthetic enquiry.....	8
Creating a conversational Community .....	9
Distinctiveness and commonality in vocal traditions and social life.....	11
<b>Outcomes.....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Legacy .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Fabrications .....</b>	<b>15</b>
Introduction.....	15
Overview.....	15
Research methods .....	16
Key Themes .....	17
<b>Outcomes.....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Legacy .....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>23</b>

## PART 3 TWO MAJOR CASE STUDIES

### Shapes of Water, Sounds of Hope

#### Introduction: Inter-cultural practice and civic engagement through art

*There is a multiplicity of cultures locally, the question for us was how best to translate this into art, how to find an angle that would stimulate a conversation that goes beyond the surface of things (Laurie Peake, panel discussion October 2017)*

Sounds of Water, Shapes of Hope was a complex durational artwork led by Los Angeles based artist Suzanne Lacy with the support of Paul Hartley, Director of the locally based arts organisation, In Situ that is based in Nelson and embedded in the area. It was the most ambitious project produced during the programme in terms of scale, complexity and budget, and it has come to occupy a unique position in the Super Slow Way portfolio. Its legacy in terms of community relations is still unfolding, but it has helped to lay the foundations for an ongoing transformation of relations between the local white and South Asian communities who are mainly of Pakistani heritage. It has also helped to rekindle a connection with textile-based industrial heritage which has been a major theme of the second year of the programme across East Lancashire. Both of these achievements will be crucial for the revitalisation of civic engagement and cultural regeneration of the area as the programme moves into its second phase.

#### Key Participants

*Shapes of Water Sounds of Hope* extended over 18 months. The concluding art work consisted of a film installation, *The Circle and the Square*, that was premiered in a local disused mill building in October 2017. The artistic process included on the one hand, community conversations focussing on the divisions and issues of local people, and on the other hand, an exploration of the potential of Dhikr, a meditational form spiritual chant practised by all Sufi communities, and Shape Note, also a form of chant with its roots in Christian Nonconformism, where individual voices find union in harmony. Local singing groups were established by the project to develop interest, bonding and local solidarity among participants. In the singing sessions which were convened by local people with musical interests traditional mill songs were also sung. These are strongly rooted in Lancashire.

A large number of local people, professionals and community based organisations attended the initial three community conversation meetings that helped to shape the project, with more than eighty people attending each of the larger meetings. These meetings preceded an ongoing set of informal community conversations and an orchestrated 'Big Conversation' in the summer of 2016. The process culminated in a huge banquet in Brierfield Mill on the day on which the *Circle and the Square* was filmed, providing a celebratory forum for conversation and the sharing of food. Brierfield Action in the Community were an important supporter as was Brierfield Town Council. The involvement of the South Asian community was in part secured through relationships In Situ had built up and was considerably expanded with the help of Rauf Bashir, Project Manager for Building Bridges, Pendle and the Free Spiritual Centre. As further indication of their diversity, the three major community conversation meetings were attended by young people from local schools, a South Asian mother's group, arts sector organisations, community police officers, public and voluntary sector professionals, the Mayor, members of businesses, mosques, churches and a range of individuals

attracted by the prospect of sharing food and culture, or an interest in community dialogue. Over time the project was able to build around itself a small, strong and committed network of individuals and groups to guide the evolution of the community development aspect of the project.

There were a number of key people who also contributed directly to *Shapes of Water Sounds of Hope*. As Suzanne Lacy is an international artist based in the USA, work on the ground with the local community was dependent on Paul Hartley, and more broadly on the relationships In Situ had established with local communities over many years. Laurie Peake, Director of Super Slow Way, remained closely involved in its development throughout. Local people were critical to the development of the project: Julian Evans, Jen Reid, Hannah Land and Hussnain Hanif were people who lived in the region who all played a key part in the singing groups. Ron Pen, Professor of Music at the University of Kentucky was brought over from the US to teach Shape Note chant and notation. Bushra Yaqoob, Uzma Raziq, Zoya Bhatti, and Tayeba Butt, all local residents, put their efforts at the service of community engagement, as did Katie Nolan and Elena Adorni from Super Slow Way. Massimiliano Mollona an anthropologist from Goldsmiths College, University of London, helped to clarify and articulate the meanings of Industrial Heritage – its labour relations, solidarities, objects, architecture, and musical forms.

## Research Methods

In line with the methods used elsewhere in the Super Slow Way programme, the researchers used a range of community observations and 20 interviews with key participants, including several with Laurie Peake and Suzanne Lacy. These were combined with rapid capture interviews with members of the public at the community conversation events. The researchers also participated in numerous discussions with Super Slow Way staff and had access to documentation of the project, especially oral history interviews with Mill workers, and video documentation of conversations between key figures. Much of the ethnographic data was collected by participant observation in the conversations, public events and singing/chant sessions. We also attended public events, groups and discussions. This data was all analysed in relation to the original aims of the project, with an eye on its still unfolding legacy. We were able to follow the programme from its initial inception as it affected different communities over a period of two years, long enough to register a building of trust, the opening up of discussion between communities and a growing willingness to engage with each other. However, even two years is insufficient to fully gauge the potential effects of a process which will take years to mature - the building of shared cultural capital, the establishment of a new commons and the civic spaces that it presupposes.

## Themes: community conversations, chant, song and film

The process that took place in Pendle through *Shapes of Water, Sounds of Hope* was an artistically supported form of intercultural community development with a documentary and artistic output in video oral history interviews of former mill workers, and a powerful aesthetic output in the form of a film and installation, *The Circle and the Square*.

The participants were living in communities, who with de-industrialisation, and the loss of common sites of employment, had been existing for many years side by side with little contact or mutual regard. Their conversations – both organised and informal - ran throughout the project and focussed on the desires and discontents of local community relations. In order to facilitate the exchange of opinions in the major public events people were seated at round tables and - very importantly - ate together. The food was carefully chosen to include both traditional Asian and Lancashire food. The first task of these newly created ‘civic’ forums was to help define a common project. As they gained in familiarity and good will, the conversations - in particular the ‘Big Conversation’ in the summer of

2016 - increasingly addressed obstacles to mutual understanding between communities and the questions people had never felt comfortable about posing in public before.

*... it allowed the conversations to mature from discussing commonalities, ... and it kind of grew to where we could have conversations where, it's political or news or culture etc, things that go on in the local area, and that happened as well, but it was still constructive, in the sense that it was looking to highlight issues but also to discuss how they could tackle those issues (Rauf Bashir, Building Bridges, Pendle)*

Parallel to the conversational process was a musical one, involving an encounter between two vocal traditions. Dhikr is practised and valued throughout the local Pakistani Sufi community and is a mystical expression of unity in the love of God and all creation. Shape Note, also a spiritual chant in the 'Sacred Harp' tradition, with distant roots in Lancashire's Nonconformism, to some extent survives nationally, but is especially prevalent in the USA through dedicated groups. Ron Pen describes it as a musical metaphor for the soul of democracy in that strong individual voices combine in harmony so that the many become one. Early in the course of the project singing groups were formed to learn Shape Note, with the help of local resident and singer Julian Evans, and share mill songs which were instantly enjoyable and musically easier to assimilate. Jen Reid, an artist who researches and performs them, was an important figure within this process.

The film and installation title, *The Circle and the Square* takes its name from combining the configuration of Dhikr, where participants sit in a circle, and Shape Note, which is organised in a square. Each was 'performed' separately in Brierfield Mill in October 2016 - coming together symbolically and actually - in a 'movement' of fusion. This musical event was followed by the mass banquet which provided an opportunity to continue the community conversations of the preceding months, as each table was asked to address further questions. The *Circle and the Square* premiered a year later in the Mill alongside the filmed oral histories of people from both communities who had once worked there. With its many elements and entry points, *Shapes of Water Sounds of Hope* engaged a wide range of individuals and groups, spanning divisions of ethnicity, occupation and generation.

### **Brierfield Mill: symbolic significance of an iconic building**

*Then this link came of the mill and all the people and the history... how do we capture that history? ... share that history with the younger generation...? So that they see how their parents who came before them set the scene today for what we have in Pendle... that transition from a white working class community, to immigration to the country, immigration to this area, how that changed the face of this community forever. (Rauf Bashir, Interview)*

Brierfield Mill dominated the economy, social life and patterns of migration and settlement in the surrounding area, as long as the textile industry flourished. It had provided employment for generations of local people and for the waves of Pakistani migrant workers recruited during the 50's and 60's. Its closure in 2010 had profoundly impacted on the economic prospects and social interaction of Brierfield and neighbouring towns. During October 2016 the mill, which, as it turned out had an exceptional acoustic for group chant, was opened to the local community for three days, on the last of which it became the film set, and a meeting point for the two vocal forms, and through them the communities who had participated in the singing, chant and conversations.

There is no question that the choice of the Mill, once the nub of the community and now a cavernous space, was inspired. It is about to be redeveloped and will soon no longer exist in its present form as an empty site which can still be filled with memory and desire. *Shapes of Water Sounds of Hope* afforded a 'concluding act' for the Mill, a symbolic drawing together of past experiences of the separate communities around the question of what future can be built together. Rauf Bashir recalled "we moved to this area in 1981 for my dad to work in the Mill, this mill for us, our family, is a life changer". One of members of the Dhikr circle found out that his grandfather had worked at the Mill, which he was unaware of before preparations for the filming. Some of the younger Muslim men who had never been in the Mill, discovered a family history shared with non-Muslims in the area. Some former mill workers returned from as far as Scotland to experience the space for one last time<sup>1</sup>.

*Got a good audience for the singing, people were moved by the performance and got to participate... Margaret from Scotland who used to work in the mill was in tears at one point back in the mill listening to something there...*

(Paul Hartley, interview)

Each filmed testimony of working in Brierfield Mill, and living in its shadow, was installed on a separate screen during the weekend launch of *The Circle and the Square a year later*. The effect on entering was to find oneself in the living presence of the people whose lives it had formed. The impact of closure for some had been devastating

*There were 53 working mills in Colne alone. ... Sad story, when it closed down, it was still a family firm and the guy who did it had to lay off the whole work force and he did it one by one, seeing each person, when the last one had gone, he went upstairs and hanged himself. His work was like family.*

(Audience member, interview)

The huge empty echoing halls of the Mill and its peeling walls had become an architectural expression of the enormous gap that had opened up in the lives of local communities with its loss, but it also came to signify openness. Bringing people together to chant, sing and film together felt like an act of reparation symbolised by the moment of musical fusion. Ron Pen, speaking for many, identified this as the most special part of the work.

## Local and international

The choice of an international artist who had no previous connection with the area was not universally popular, especially with small arts organisations who had a long and respected track record of socially engaged practice, but were also, in some cases, struggling with problems of capacity and survival. From Laurie Peake's point of view there were good reasons to bring in an outside perspective and a level of experience that had not yet developed locally. As far as local communities were concerned, this was clearly not a matter of trading on Lacy's reputation, as her work would only have been known within the arts sector; within the latter, of course, it helped to raise the profile of the project. She came with a track record in combining community development with artistic production in projects that involved the orchestration of large scale public exchanges around issues of pressing social concern, such *The Roof Is On Fire* 1993-1994 in which public high school students and the police in Los Angeles were engaged in unscripted and unedited conversations crime, youth and policing. Even though the decision to commission her in Pendle was not welcomed by some local artists, it offered experience of method and scale from which others could learn.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://superslowway.org.uk/blog/reflections-on-shapes-of-water-sounds-of-hope/>

Lacy herself was never in any doubt that the feasibility of the project would rest on the slow patient work conducted by In Situ and particularly on Paul Hartley's relationships and organisational ability

*One of the moments I remember was one of the dinners that we had, ... I was watching Paul very closely, because if he did not have the capacity, the really deep capacity to organize Muslim and white people and get them into the same place in the same numbers I knew that there wouldn't be much we could do, the representation would be tokenist. And that first dinner that I came into was pretty amazing. He had done a major job. (Suzanne Lacy, Interview)*

Lacy visited Pendle at intervals throughout the project and much of the ground level organisation of involving local individuals, groups and organisations continued in her absence. In this respect the working relationship established between Lacy and Hartley was one of co-dependence, where Hartley, building on local knowledge, took responsibility for mobilising the community networks In Situ had developed, and extending them as the project grew.

### **Cultural regeneration and social capital: long-term perspective, scale and ambition**

*Ten years ago there was substantial investment and opportunities for community development but minus the activism. The cutbacks under the Coalition government had a big impact in Pendle – services and opportunities for social regeneration have been disappearing, with a fragmented community sector- poor collaboration between community groups and little community capacity to fill the gap. This project has aimed to shape and develop that (Rauf Bashir, Panel Discussion, October 2017)*

In Laurie Peake's view the solidification of historic cultural divisions in the area itself called for a certain scale of response, and the formulation of an ambition which could guide the programme going forward – the generation of new cultural and social capital needed to underpin regeneration of the area.

With the help of Paul Hartley, the initiative could be built on the ongoing capillary action of local arts practice

*A lot of the work of In Situ for the first few years was taking time to meet people and talk to them, understand how people interact with each other and the role of the artists in that (Paul Hartley, interview)*

Laurie Peake felt that the time was ripe for a large-scale project that would generate momentum, impact and step-change. The aim was to intensify and widen the cross-community encounter through an inter-cultural art project, to penetrate both local and national media, and to further boost everyday word of mouth communication between residents. An initial target of 1000 people in the Mill for the final three day event was therefore a call to action. Over the course of the project a broad spectrum of people were engaged and 500 filled the ground floor for the closing banquet.

*The second public meeting in particular galvanised it. There were approximately 30 groups in the room, representing a significant resource and the realisation that they could generate a greater sense of common purpose in collaboration. Small scale projects have taken place, but they have lacked stability and consistency over time. A long term perspective and process*

*to build relationships has been needed. [what it produced] was an amazing impetus to connect ... people have remained involved (Rauf Bashi, panel)*

The contrast between large scale concentrated impact and the slow, careful embedded work that is diffused throughout the community over time was felt as a tension within In Situ, and within Super Slow Way's organisation itself. Paul Hartley summed up some of the challenges he experienced of working in this way

*I see the other work we're doing as ambitious in its own right – just about smaller stuff - slower, very local but it has achieved so much. However, scale has an impact and might change things going forward – we have to engage with local councillors and MP's. Suzanne forces that because she goes to those people. She has this confidence to operate in that way so it is interesting to see what that does for our presence within Pendle.*

*For example, we've had difficulties in the past convincing the Pendle Vision Board to see the role of Arts and Culture - Suzanne has made me think more about how we operate strategically as an organisation. I struggle with it because part of me is that I'm so hands on. Suzanne sees that and challenges me. (Paul Hartley, Interview)*

Hartley alludes here to differences in practice methodology, the benefits of status and confidence that an international artist brings and the value In Situ attributes to working organically with people in the place where they live. There were certain 'pressure points' in course of the project where the artist's push for a strong aesthetic outcome jarred with this approach. We have been told that some of the local people who made the effort to learn Shape Note, felt undervalued when more experienced Shape Note singers from outside the area were brought in to strengthen the final performance. Julian Evans who helped to lead a singing group that struggled with Shape Note observed that Shape Note was perhaps not the right choice to encourage lots of people because the process of learning it had to be very artist led. However, he also recognised (in interview) that "the artistic advantage is profile, publicity, kudos...but some people went away because of shapenote... [perhaps there was] something lost, but [something] gained? The final product was beautiful...". Like many, he stressed the importance of the conversations and of ongoing projects to sustain any gains. At the time of interview he was applying for funding with Jen Reid and Hanif Husnain for another singing group.

We detected no signs from the general public that that these two approaches are considered to be alternatives. Members of the South Asian community, in particular, conveyed that they felt recognised and respected and that their cultural contribution was taken seriously. In part this was because of the investment of resources and time in the project, as well as pride in the high artistic quality of the final chanting in the Mill and the film that it will travel to major cultural venues internationally. No one we spoke to, however, denied that the process set in motion must continue if this new communicative climate between communities is to be sustained, nor that it will require ongoing effort. There is a community level realism that the work of building relationships and understanding will still be vital, and a new realisation that the arts and culture can be put at the service of these developments.

### **Action research and aesthetic enquiry**

The aim in Shapes of Water Sounds of Hope was to recognise the distinctive cultures of local communities, and in putting them into dialogue with one another, facilitate a process which would



develop its own distinctive modality and aesthetic of interaction, and so shape the eventual outcome. Expanding cultural capacity locally, and for the longer term, was also an important element of the project's rationale. The community development processes could not be anything other than co-produced if they were to continue, but beyond this the problem was how to combine depth of inquiry with the scale of the operation. Paul Hartley - in interview - describes Lacy's talent as "asking questions that get under the skin of a place" and this is facilitated through a curiosity (and through 'outsider' as well as 'insider' lenses) that interrogate the taken-for-granted.

*What organisations in this area can have their capacity enhanced through the production of the work? What individuals can learn to do things they didn't know how to do before? How do people make connections and relationships with each other that will serve them later? So in this project we have worked very hard with action community partners to frame the conversation ... so it's also food and dinner and conversation. I would never tell a community what were the things that should be discussed, I would be working with community action people and we would be strategizing the kinds of conversations (Suanne Lacy, Interview)*

Essential to this curiosity and commitment to authentic community voice, is a sense of the everyday 'aesthetics of living' within communities – the textures, tonalities and rhythms of experience and how they are organized and represented. This involves a close observation of what happens when an artistic process is introduced

*I'm very interested in experimenting. ... So for me as a performance artist, I'm interested in the change of rhythm, of framing, of relationships and how that operates within an aesthetic sphere. ... I work very hard to make a piece have integrity in the community, and then I try to shape it so that it has some sort of aesthetic power, and then I video it, and then I do a documentation of it. (Suzanne Lacy, Interview)*

## Creating a conversational Community

In organised form the community conversations included the three large public events, the Big Conversation over the summer of 2016 and the banquet tables at the finale and the panel discussion that accompanied the launch of *The Circle and the Square* in September 2017. However, the process also stimulated a myriad of informal greetings, exchanges, discussions and equivocations as an uncertain mix of memory, prejudice and projection surfaced in relation to immigration.

*One of the things that I have seen is that there are people that I have had conversations with who have lived in the area for sixty years. They have seen the area change a lot. One of the major changes they have seen has been Asian people coming into the area, and that the Asian community look after each other. There is a strong sense of nostalgia. . . "Fifty years ago, we had this, that, community, love, plenty of work, the economy, good health system, welfare state, everything". . . . It had nothing to do with the Asian community moving into the area. But sometimes people need an avenue to blame. "Well actually, this happened because of that . . ." (South Asian Male heritage male resonant, interview)*

What the final event in the Mill would look like and how it would be arrived at was for a long time uncertain, but as the artistic process gathered, the difficult conversations unfolded. Questions of sameness and difference, ethnic, spiritual, political, historical and aesthetic were at their core.

During this process, when Suzanne Lacy was present, but also in her absence, Paul Hartley helped keep the process moving, encouraging the Sufi group to take a lead in the conversations concerning

community, cultural and ethnic relations. The effect was that in taking such a public role the insularity and reticence so often attributed to this minoritised population was dispelled. The organised Dhikr group that collaborated with the project was all male, but women also chant, and, we are informed, have their own practice, as became clear from their animated participation in the final event.

While the singing and chant provided the 'common object' through which people could familiarise themselves with the cultural idiom of the other, the aim of the conversations was to name the tensions that divided the communities and explore the ordinary discomforts and irritations that degrade the quality of interaction between people whose ways of living are strange to each other; where 'white flight' or mistrust of Muslims is normalised, and where what is strange turns to 'alien'. This is the ground of perceived threats to identity, safety and customs that become a self-fulfilling prophecy, where banal discourtesies are misconstrued as racialized affront.

*The concept of community relations - Cohesion, white flight, does happen. The conversation I had with that white lady about the young lads throwing chicken bones on the street. It is not because they are brown, or Pakistani, it is because they are kids (South Asian heritage male respondent, interview)*

The outward content of discussion at these events was very recognisable as the alien is always constructed through stereotypes in which the dehumanised other comes to embody the insecurities that threaten the self. The important point was that the questions needed to be asked in public and the stereotypical thinking owned before it could be dispersed. Why did the local Muslim/South Asian community not want to mix with white people? Why were young South Asian men dismissive and arrogant? Why did the older generation only speak in their own language? Why were whites uninterested in mixing? Why was the sense of rejection not acknowledged? Why were all Muslims tainted with terror? Eventually issues of extreme sensitivity such as the Middle East, Isil and Media portrayal of Muslims were also discussed.

*The negative views of Muslims will always be the same, whether it is now or in ten years time. We can only do what we are doing here, doing good and sharing food, being friendly, that is all we can do. As for the future and attitudes to us and the community. I would say it has to improve, because things are not looking good at the moment. (South Asian heritage male respondent, interview)*

By the time of the final banquet it was possible - indeed it seemed natural - in the context of a celebratory event to raise yet further questions, now bearing on the issue of responsibility held in common. We take this as evidence of the fact that a deliberative space had been established. At the same time it was a communicative space in which participation was personalised; people were asked to bring one item from home to represent their family life. Tables were invited to identify a pressing matter for the whole area. They were asked to discuss barriers to engagement that remained, and how, together, they might better serve their community.

There was another important factor that made it possible to air this mutual mistrust in public - and move beyond it. As we explain below, the discussions did not merely take place alongside the artistic process, they were infused by it.

## Distinctiveness and commonality in vocal traditions and social life

The conversations could not have occurred without a basic generosity of spirit that socially engaged public art, which involves a 'gift relation', tries to promote. Moreover the meetings always involved eating together with food provided for free, cooked and served by locals; in terms of organisation they involved the time and voluntary efforts of members of both communities. This cooperation and sociability was undoubtedly nourished by the ideal and aesthetic of harmony that is at the core of both Dhikr and Shape Note and it helped people to negotiate the awkward moments of dissonance that often arose. For instance, the spiritual significance of the vocal forms, essential to their practitioners, was a source of discomfort to some; the idea of 'performance' in itself was problematic for the Sufi group for whom Dhikr involves an apprehension of the divine and in Pendle is restricted to the mosque; overt religiosity was off-putting to some traditional white participants, while the religious aspect of the Sufi chant as performed in a public space was uncomfortable for more traditional Muslims. However, what the chant, whether Dhikr or Shape Note, offered was an aesthetic form that can only be realised collectively and in harmony. The 'musical conversation' arose from setting alongside each other these two vocal forms that had culturally specific resonance yet acoustically, were mutually available for unexpected combinations. The distinctiveness of each could be apprehended, their spirituality respected and the aesthetic pleasure shared because it involved the discovery of a relation, and of qualities held in common.

*The Shape Note and the Sufi chanting were distinct separate components ... Some people may have experienced them before. But by virtue of coming to experience Sufi chanting, they will have had to experience the other, Shape Note... it allows them to see something else, even though that was not their intention (South Asian heritage male, interview)*

The sense of what made these forms different, and how they were similar, eventually became a sonic metaphor for the question the communities were asking of each other. Essential to the culmination of the process was the 'fusion' piece that features in the film and was not achieved until the final day, but was nevertheless present as an idea throughout, gradually gaining force as an expectation – a potential musical 'consummation' of the meeting of the two cultural forms.

The realisation of the fusion piece, which is intrinsic to the final composition of the film, also made sense of the effort that had been required to 'import' and learn Shape Note and then to boost its performance by bringing in experienced singers from groups outside the area. There were also those who would have preferred to stay with the more familiar mill songs. These secular songs, which formed part of the first community meeting, tell vivid stories of the harshness of industrial labour and life among 19<sup>th</sup> century mill workers. They are by turns humorous, angry, salacious and sad, and the recovery of the tradition, with the help of Jen Reid, was, judging by the people who joined in, enjoyed across communities. But, mill songs cannot be harmonically - let alone spiritually - melded with Dhikr. It was not only for reasons of aesthetic compatibility and contrast that Shape Note was performed in the mill alongside Dhikr, but for its *symbolic* value. Each vocal form, however remote their cultural origins could be understood as reaching for a commonality in human experience that is apprehended by the other and it is above all through vocal harmony that this finds expression.

*In terms of links Sufi chanting and shape note, exploring sounds, what kinds of songs, chants, rhythms... exploring fusion ... found something that we think will work, Shape Note song, moving into song with chant, and chant moving on to Sufi song ..Has some energy to it. Keeps the individual identity of each for but brings them together.*  
(Rauf Bashir, Interview)

For Rauf Bashir, with an already established local Sufi chant group and an organization that promotes community cohesion, it was a combination that made sense, and a counterpart to the community conversations.

## Outcomes

The intensive community development process built on the connections and relationships already established by In Situ and Super Slow Way and extended them considerably in terms of reach and complexity.

A wide range of local community organisations came into the ambit of an art project, and witnessed its particular value for community development.

The relationships established acquired a mutual confidence because they grew through the experience of a common project, and its successful realisation.

Participants and public had a shared experience of aesthetic pleasure born of the encounter between vocal forms that were both familiar and strange, providing a metaphor for their perceptions of one another.

The acknowledgement of divisions and barriers to inter-community exchange was a precursor to a renewed resolve to find spaces and opportunities for collaboration and sociability.

Through the key role played by one of its members, capacity was raised within In Situ in working at scale, and with new methods.

A conversational community was established with its own distinctive aesthetic represented in a 'high art' film production and installation.

A filmed oral history record of former Mill workers' experiences of Brierfield Mill was established at a moment of transition before it is redeveloped for future use.

*The Circle and the Square*, was produced out of a prolonged process of community collaboration and artistic direction; it is a valued local record and will have international reach as a representation of the intercultural journey undertaken.

## Legacy

The legacy of a project such as this is necessarily complex and long-term because it involves a change in the way that communities represent themselves to themselves and to the wider world, and a durable shift in intercultural relations towards collaboration, sociability and civic participation. As Rauf Bashir observed "we grow as a community by being part of wider society" (panel discussion September 2017).

Within the arc of the *Shapes of Water, Sounds of Hope* cultural capital has been developed as the summary of project outcomes above underline. The project has raised mutual confidence and cross-cultural understanding and demonstrated the positive contribution that can be made by art, thus helping secure local support for Super Slow Way and the cultural platform on which it will build its second phase. It has reconnected the communities with a sense of their industrial heritage at a

moment of transition, as the Mill is about to be transformed by refurbishment for future commercial and public use. Sustaining these gains will require ongoing work, not only by Super Slow Way but by the community organisations and networks that have been mobilized by the project.

## Conclusion

In the light of the ambition and scale of the project that was eventually delivered it is salutary to recall Laurie Peake's comment at the outset of the programme that it was absurd to suppose that an arts programme could unite fractured communities, or cater for cultural needs as disparate and conflicted as those in East Lancashire. This would remain the case if Super Slow Way were to operate as a standalone cultural programme – however well-pitched the offer, however excellent the quality of the art, and however accurately targeted the (segmented) audiences.

Shapes of Water, Sounds of Hope produced an artistically acclaimed object in terms of the film *The Circle and the Square* which will offer an enduring record of this achievement. It also rendered aesthetically tensions within a process that was sustained through a spirit of generous readiness to recognise the other, but which was not without its measure of discord and disbelief. What it depicts is the outcome of an encounter between two cultural traditions in their efforts to discover a, sometimes elusive, common ground and to appreciate each other not only for what they have in common but also for what makes them different.

The frustrations produced by the project were most acute within the local arts sector, some of whom saw it as a challenge to their own embedded practice, others who questioned the virtues of scale and yet others who resented the expenditure and profile at a time when they themselves were struggling to survive. As we have documented there was also at times perplexity at the methodology of the lead artist, and the decision to bring in an outsider from somewhere that felt as culturally remote as the USA. However, from the many members of the public who we interviewed, and who engaged with the process in significant numbers, there were few adverse comments, rather we gained evidence that they had embarked on a process of re-imagining how they might live better side by side but also, in some ways together. Members of the South Asian community who we spoke to felt profoundly 'heard' – and affirmed that the cultural spaces of Pendle had expanded to accommodate their spiritual practice in a vocal form that all who wished could share, including its ethic of kindness and fellowship. Local white families for whom the working lives of successive generations had unfolded in the shadow of the mill, were able commemorate, revisit and reflect, appreciating that the processes of globalisation that had led to its closure had little to do with the patterns of migration and settlement that in more prosperous times had allowed it to flourish. In the community conversations, stereotypical historical competition over who takes the jobs and gets the services surfaced but was readily dispelled. Instead the focus was on the problems of living in the same physical place and cultural space in the here and now: from fear of terrorism, to 'white flight', insularity and unruly teenagers.

Through effective partnerships with local communities and above all with the benefit of local knowledge and responsiveness to the needs and desires of the populations served, something significant took place. This 'something' was more than an event or an object – it involved the creation of a new cultural space, which we have elsewhere designated 'third space' because it is both condition and outcome of a community conversation – or rather a multiplicity of community conversations that set in motion a social process, inscribed by a shared experience of art. Its purpose is to develop what several years ago (In New Model Arts Institutions and Public Engagement) Froggett et al (2011) described as 'the art of creative illusion' the ability to imagine a future that is different and discover in themselves the resources to bring it about.

The process is still working its way through and time will tell whether its legacy in terms of inter-cultural and civic renewal will be sustained. There is much more work to be done. What is clear is that many members of both the South Asian and white communities have encountered one another in the context of a shared project in which the identity of distinctive aesthetic and spiritual traditions are preserved, while the 'breathtaking' risk of fusion – neither the one nor the other but 'both and ...' was confronted.

*The aesthetic third, as ever, arises in the 'in-between'. Here they are captured on the film in the transitions Shape Note and Dhikr - thrilling because they alternate sometimes disjointedly and at others seamlessly, sometimes seeming to hover for a moment in the in-between. I never know which it will be. In this art form which is nothing if not regulation of breath, I find myself pleasurablely unable to breathe (observation notes Lynn Froggett)*

Here then is a musical metaphor for the dynamics of cultural and civic renewal which in the longer term is the intended legacy of the Super Slow Way programme. It is neither cultural difference nor sameness that will generate a future that is different, though both are important to a sense of belonging, and the need for each of them has been observed in Super Slow Way's programming. Rather it is what happens in the unknown territory of in-between, where much is uncertain and there is all to play for and to lose. Shared aesthetic production and reception is one way of shaping what emerges in this zone of encounter, which although itself penetrated by ethics, politics and history has its unique moment as a register of experience in space apart, offering a symbolic counterpart to a developing civic space where community relations, separateness and togetherness, are always in flux.

## Fabrications

### Introduction

The manufacturing identity of Pennine Lancashire has been shaped by textiles. The *Fabrications* programme offered an artistic response to this industrial legacy between 7<sup>th</sup> - 30<sup>th</sup> September 2017. Activities took place across a range of locations beside or in close proximity to the Leeds and Liverpool Canal, including historic venues such as Gawthorpe Hall, Elmfield Hall at Gatty Park, Brierfield Mill and the Burnley Cotton Exchange.

*... they are woven through its social and urban fabric. By the end of the 19th century the area, stretching along the banks of the Leeds & Liverpool Canal, was producing 85% of the world's cotton goods and it was this global trade that brought thousands of workers to drive its mills over the ensuing centuries, building a creative, industrious and diverse population that shapes the area today.*

(Super Slow Way, Programme of Events)

The programme has included an ambitious range of projects ranging from the small and intimate to large-scale international, either through international artists or covering global themes, all in some way relating to textile production and related craft, viewed through an artist's creative lens. The theme resonated with people who live in the area for whom the cotton mills are embedded in family histories and personal experience. Mills pepper the urban and natural landscape, many of them closed, but some such as Northlight Mill in Brierfield in the process of being re-purposed for commercial and public use. In this period of transition as new uses are sought for these buildings, *Fabrications* has brought the past to life again in an attempt to re-capture the creativity and pride in this legacy and re-imagine it as a basis for a post-industrial future. In some cases buildings have been reopened – a first step towards the regeneration of place-based identity through art.

*I don't think of heritage as history so much as what is in people's DNA. The response to fabrications was so immediate and enthusiastic – a real eye-opener for me ... unlocked a door for me in terms of accessibility and also offered a whole other realm of meaning, another metaphor. The canal has been a really useful metaphor as well as a material resource and so have textiles, actually, because of their multi-dimensionality: politics, economy, globalisation, making – also their aesthetic qualities and possibilities in terms of evolution of modern methods of fabrication and their scientific possibilities and digital outputs ...*

(Laurie Peake, interview)

### Overview

*Fabrications* was produced by Jenny Rutter, Associate Producer at Super Slow Way. Existing Super Slow Way partnerships were reflected in the diversity, depth and quality of the *Fabrications* programme which worked to establish an interconnectivity between local, national and international on the one hand, and art and community engagement on the other. In some cases these differences

have been mixed into a single vision through the actual experience of developing a project that is strongly responsive to place.

Examples of this depth and diversity include international installations and performances in one of the most local and iconic of buildings in the area, Brierfield Mill in Nelson – Metis’ *World Factory*); artists and organisations of national renown finding new meaning in the local, such as the disused Cotton Exchange at Blackburn, (Bella May Leonard’s *Human Hands Present*); the *Selvedge Fair* coming to Pendle for the first time<sup>2</sup>; a residency in and with the Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery (Debbie Smyth’s *A Little Bird Told Me...*); opportunities for disadvantaged or marginalised groups (*Social Fabric* (Grennan and Sperandio) and *Shared Threads*, (Lisa Scarlet Ryan) both in Burnley), *Local colour* (Claire Wellesley Smith, Gatty Park Accrington); and, with an eye on the canal that joins otherwise disparate communities, Harriet Riddell’s *Weft Along the Waterway*.

The following list of artists and projects demonstrates the impressive range and diversity of the Fabrications programme.

- Weft along the Waterway — Harriet Riddell
- A Little Bird Told Me... — Debbie Smyth
- Human Hands Present — Bella May Leonard
- Luminary — Serena Partridge
- Shared Threads – Lisa Scarlet Ryan
- The Social Fabric — Grennan & Sperandio
- Recollection through Thread — Sarah Earnshaw
- Threaditti — Amanda Odlin-Bates, Christopher Molloy, Lisa Ryan
- Cordwainers & Curriers — Jeni McConnell
- Community Quilt Project Community Clothing — Jeni McConnell
- Local Colour - Claire Wellesley Smith
- Selvedge Fair - Pendle Heritage Centre
- Sunday Best — Cerise Ward, Helen Oxley and Clare Evans

All the exhibitions, events, performances, installations and workshops were woven into the social fabric of the area encouraging community conversations that are an essential part of the artistic vision of Super Slow Way, and a means of developing social legacy for the future.

In the light of the success of *Fabrications* plans are afoot to establish it as a recurring biennial, independent of Super Slow Way. The festivals will showcase textile inspired work locally conceived and created in-between festival years, as well as commissioning national and international artists.

## Research methods

The research team conducted selected participatory observational visits and artist and stakeholder interviews, with Jenny Rutter (producer) and Laurie Peake (Director of Super Slow Way). It also conducted brief rapid capture interviews with audience members across a range of projects in the

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<sup>2</sup> “Selvedge is a magazine that acknowledges the significance of textiles as a part of everyone’s story. We are surrounded by cloth from the cradle to the grave and by exploring our universal emotional connection to fibre we share the stories and values that mean the most to us. From why we love the sound of a needle pulling thread through taut linen, to why we are fascinated by the clothes we wear and the fibres we unknowingly rely on. There are many sides to every story and Selvedge is dedicated to finding and nurturing textiles from every angle. We believe that textiles unite all humanity and in surveying the development of society it is clear that from a spider’s web to the world-wide web, textiles appear as the protagonist.” ([www.selvedge.org/pages/about-us](http://www.selvedge.org/pages/about-us))



*Fabrications* programme. These included *World Factory* performance, *Fabrications Exchange* discussion, *A Little Bird Told Me...* exhibition and residency, *Human Hands Present* exhibition, *The Social Fabric* exhibition, *Shared Threads* exhibition, and *Recollection Through Thread* exhibition. This has been accompanied by a study of the programme and archive material on the web.

## Key Themes

### Textiles, buildings and place

A feature of the *Fabrications* programme is to root art works and conversations in place, reminding, re-igniting and re-engaging the local population with a sense of place-based identity that has to some extent been challenged by the demise of textile manufacturing. This has been compounded by austerity and the severe financial strains placed on Local Authorities and consequently the closure or reduction in services of cultural institutions such as libraries and museums. The programme has provided an opportunity to temporarily re-open important local buildings such as the Blackburn Cotton Exchange and to scope further sites for *Fabrications 2019*. Because textile legacy is ubiquitous in Pennine Lancashire the cross-over between *Fabrications* and other Super Slow Way Commissions such as *Shapes of Water Sounds of Hope* (see case study) added value to each in terms of both the textile manufacturing theme and response to architectural heritage. Super Slow Way was prescient about these possibilities: as with *Human Hands Present* in the Blackburn Cotton Exchange the siting of *Shapes of Water Sounds of Hope* in Brierfield Mill brought the aesthetic as well as the functional qualities of the buildings to the fore and prompted people to ask questions about how their future uses might serve the communities that live around them – an outcome which is far from guaranteed as commercial developers take them over.

The mill in Brierfield was also opened up for Metis' *World Factory*, giving participants in the game/performance a chance to reflect upon the contemporary chain of manufacture and distribution implicated in the making of clothes in a Chinese factory today. These chains are the result of processes of globalisation that have brought about the de-industrialisation of the region and will, for better or worse, determine the shape and quality of working lives to come.

The production used professional actors to draw the audience into an elaborate game where they performed the recreation of a factory, and were encouraged to embody the feelings and behaviour of a modern Chinese capitalist factory owner. Dealers ran through and in between the tables where the audience was seated. Each table was handed a box of cards, some money and instructions. Groups were to manage a Chinese factory for twelve months, keeping the workforce motivated and the company solvent while producing saleable garments. The four dealers stood on podiums at different points on the mill floor while motivational messages flashed on screens, such as 'prudence and increased productivity through hard work and longer hours by the workforce, the populace, will bring greater profits and prosperity to the population as a whole'. The cards handed to the audience participants by the dealers contained details of the factory and the workforce. One participant who had worked in China vouched for the authenticity of the game:

*I think this is really good. Really realistic. I worked in the textile industry in China as a buyer for years. It is really hard there, the workers do work long hours and often sleep at their machines.*

(Audience participant)

The essence of the game was to demonstrate how ruthless and cold factory management is in China, but also in the UK and around the world

This was a good example of how Super Slow Way was able to import an internationally acclaimed show developed by a production company from outside of Lancashire and give it a new resonance through location. Whereas *World Factory* performed elsewhere offers an interesting critique of capitalism, denouncing the system that forces slave labour and poverty wages for the benefit of the rich, in Brierfield an implicit line traced a connection between mill's past and the textile industry's present, expanding context and time. Pride in the local mill, its products and its role in developing and maintaining community cohesion despite hardship, was relived through *World Factory* and took on an international perspective

*...the pride that workers had in the things they made, even though they were paid so poorly. It is similar to the awful disaster in (Bangladesh) when the building collapsed. Stories came out of workers saying 'yes we were not in a good building, we were paid badly but we were proud of what we made'. Just as workers here in Lancashire.*  
(Zoe Svendsen, Co-producer)

Another iconic local building, the Cotton Exchange in Blackburn, was built in 1863 at the height of the cotton trade. The Cotton Exchange was a key driver in the growth of what became the most important cotton weaving town in the North. When the industry collapsed the Exchange was converted into a cinema in 1919 and finally closed in 2005. It now stands empty, and has become progressively more dilapidated. *Human Hands Present* by Bella May Leonard drew together art and culture, heritage, local commercial interests, the support of Blackburn Council and the efforts of the building charity, Re:Source that now owns the site. Bella May Leonard's work displays embroidery patterns situated unexpectedly on mattresses strewn about the space, conveying a jarring yet pleasing effect of contrast between the factory produced mattresses and the hand-woven embroidery. One of the visitors asked if the mattresses were for sleeping. For many visitors, this was a completely new form of art and difficult to understand; but it is precisely this kind of question and provocation that the art seeks to rouse in people.

*People just wandered in, because the building is actually closed ... lots of memories, trying to work out the position of the cinemas, great for us as a charity, collected £180 just in the first couple of days. People are wanting it to reopen ... People have come with a Fabrications leaflet knowing that there's a display here, people have come to Blackburn, not necessarily from Blackburn. So we've had people in who wouldn't necessarily have come in... and at the same time people wandering in just because the doors are open.*  
(Caer Butler, Building Manager)

As in *World Factory*, *Human Hands Present* was not specifically created for the site, but through happy coincidence, choice of site and its theme of textile work, took on another dimension and brought purpose and meaning through conversations. Some of them brought living memories associated to the use of the building as a cinema, and all were enveloped in the dusty mystery of its Gothic windows and architecture.

The artist explained how working with *Super Slow Way* has made possible the interconnections between programmes and projects, so that this work, which was commissioned for the *Festival of Making* could be assimilated by *Fabrications*

*This work was first exhibited at the national Festival of Making in May, and that is how they (Super Slow Way) told me about the Fabrications project ... Interesting, because I've not*

*responded to the building, I've put my work in it and curated the space myself, so I started with Super Slow Way on a different project and it's evolved and they supported me to do this.*  
(Bella May Leonard, artist)

It was interesting to note here how a well pitched exhibition was able to generate new conversations and surprises:

*Two separate men coming in, at slightly different times, looked round at the artwork, and I went and had a look and one of them came to me and started talking to me about the artwork. His daughter studied textiles, so we could talk about that, and then these two men met while we were going round the exhibition and suddenly worked out that they were both exactly the same age, both 63, 'oh hang on a minute, we're both from the same area...' it turned out that they went to Primary School together, same class, so they started to reminisce about all these stories of all the people that they knew together ... and it was really lovely for those two men to just bond over this in this monumental church-like place...*  
(Bella May Leonard, artist)

As a result of such experiences the building itself is being thought of in different ways. Through the use of the building as an exhibition space, new and exciting possibilities can be imagined for its future use:

*It's given me a lot of ideas, and vision going forward, of what this place could be. Other artists have come in and asked if they can display... and I can see a lot of possibilities about using the building now rather than keeping it closed for when we are ready, as we are renovating... The Blackburn Museum are doing something in November for two evenings, the Arts Council in Blackburn have approached us, lots of individual artists, musicians...*  
(Caer Butler, Building Manager)

### **Local, national and international**

*Fabrications* ensured a wide range of opportunities for engagement with different populations and interests, and included local, national and international art. World Factory has been discussed above. As has previously been noted in this report, one of the significant issues about funding these performances is the difficulty in achieving sufficient ticket sales to cover the cost of staging such events. Laurie Peake, Director of Super Slow Way, has explained how Super Slow Way is working to address this difficulty in business plans for future programming, and it is to be hoped that in time, as arts events become more commonplace in the area through the Super Slow Way project, that a ticketing culture will grow and evolve.

At the other end of the scale, but no less important in terms of quality of experience, some of the projects in *Fabrications* were directed at smaller participatory groups using local artists. The *Shared Threads* exhibition at Burnley Mechanics – where local textile designer, Lisa Scarlet Ryan led workshops with the local community in Burnley, finalising in an exhibition of experimental textile work - and *Local Colour*, Gatty Park – where artist Claire Wellesley Smith led tours, with participants of her residency project, of the historic dye works within the grounds of Gatty Park in Accrington, are examples of work that respond to local need and could also maintain impetus in the intervening years between biennials.

*Claire's [Wellesley Smith] project [Local Colour] at Gatty Park is a lovely example of how it can be done – she has a very gentle, giving, non-judgemental way which was really*

*responsive to people. She created a safe space where she could help shape what people wanted to do, where they could participate on a level - drawing out creative things, and there were so many entry points: heritage, growing, sharing, making, craft*

*The group were recruited through Community Solutions who are based at Gatty Park and work with socially isolated, hard-to-reach people, some of them with mental health issues ...*  
(Jenny Rutter, Associate Producer, Super Slow Way, interview)

Community Solutions operates from Elmfield Hall, Gatty Park, and helped recruit and offer support for the project which unusually attracted an all-male group. It describes itself as an organisation that aims to “empower local people to meet local needs within the communities of Lancashire and beyond; promoting inter-dependence, confidence and self-esteem” (Community Solutions website). This, as Jenny Rutter points out, is a good way to ensure that participants in socially engaged arts projects have access to resources that are beyond the artist’s remit and expertise. A similar solution was offered by Ground Up, an arts-led community organisation in Burnley for *Shared Threads*.

The *Shared Threads* exhibition was a show of experimental textile work produced by local people guided by local artist, Lisa Scarlet Ryan. Ryan explains the deeper meanings of working with local people who find themselves at a disadvantage in society, and how art and care can become part of the same project as embraced by the Super Slow Way vision

*I have done a workshop on this and lots of social engagement. So the two bits of work in there, on the wall, they represent the tower bridge. We knew we were doing that technique. How can we work about what was on our mind? Some people have issues, but what we do is talk through those issues through the art. We spoke about artists, social and economic issues. We talked about personal issues and how people could use the arts to deal with their addictions it was very much a socially engaged project that linked in with Fabrications.*  
(Lisa Ryan, artist, interview)

Unlike a showcase event such as *World Factory*, which raised the profile of the programme and attracted visitors from outside of the area, the local projects have been nurtured through regular and frequent contact with communities. For example, the participants in *Shared Threads* were recruited through advertising regular workshops throughout 2017 in the Basement studio in Burnley Mechanics and the Shift Café in Burnley. Lisa Ryan is at pains to point out that although care and conversation form part of the project, the basis of the work is quality art, and indeed the project has created art works that have been sold with the profit being reinvested in the ongoing work of the participants. The reinvestment into the project helps to ensure its sustainability.

## Past, present and future

*Fabrications* stimulated echoes of an industrial past of textile manufacture and weaving, linking them with contemporary art and crafts. Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery is a fine example of Victorian architecture. Super Slow Way commissioned and funded a residency in which artist, Debbie Smyth, responded to the collection. Curator, Stephanie Seville, describes how Super Slow Way brokered the relationship between museum and artist.

*As Art Curator, I am employed three days a week at Blackburn Museum. Super Slow Way funded the artist’s residency but they also found that artist and supported both the museum and artist in finding common ground to begin looking into collections and starting the residency. There are unavoidable strains on my time as curator here and with a focus on*

*collections and making those collections accessible, I lack time to explore new opportunities on occasion. Working with Super Slow Way opened up an opportunity to me and the museum but also allowed me to marry up collections work with access to contemporary art practice.*

(Stephanie Seville, Art Curator Blackburn Museum, Interview)

This is a Museum which, though under severe financial pressure, is perfectly aware of its potential to contribute to a place-making agenda, beyond its role as a keeper of cultural heritage. Its relationship with Super Slow Way is not merely as added resource, but from the beginning as a natural partner expanding the opportunity to open up the museum and engage the public

*[I have been] involved with SSW from the inception, I was part of the original bid writing team and sit on the board so SSW is part of the fabric of what I do and not something new and extra.*

(Rebecca Johnson, Arts and Heritage Manager)

*Fabrications* provided a metaphor of a society that was built through making textiles, weaving and spinning. Debbie Smyth's thread drawings explored the collections within this metaphor. She unearthed bird related objects from the museum store and used threads that wove their way along the gallery walls to evoke a 'flight of fancy'. Smyth was creating the thread mural while the museum was open and this became a source of interest for visitors; they then later returned to the Museum when the piece was completed. Among the visitors, was a Foundation Course from Blackburn College, actually and symbolically representing the future of Blackburn.

An arts festival dedicated to textiles and materials in this area of the north-west of England is more than a premise for the development of the arts, it reaches for deeper roots of meaning, history, local knowledge and experience. Through the residency the museum extended its role from keeper of heritage to embrace contemporary art practice, acquiring for its collection one of the works Smyth created while she was there, so symbolically and actually fusing past and present. As we have seen, in different ways, this is also a feature of the renovation and regeneration of old buildings for new projects.

'Regeneration' for *Fabrications* was connected not only with attention to existing institutions but also to promotion of newer ones such as local further and higher education establishments. Sarah Earnshaw, a local artist, who graduated from Blackburn College, was supported by *Fabrications* to exhibit her work *Recollection Through Thread*. Based in a new professional art space, the Prism Gallery, and located in one of the many older buildings of Blackburn, this was another example of the creative use of bringing old and new into combination, exemplified in the renovation of an old building into a new purpose and serving the community in partnership with the College - an experiment in the making.

Similarly, the Fashion Design Department from the University of Central Lancashire collaborated with a group of post-graduate students from the MA Textiles course and the Ground Up community group, to present a series of textile graffiti – *Threadiffiti* - using thread, rope, crochet and embroidery. In this way, *Fabrications* is supporting the next generation of up and coming artists, critical to a sustainable future for the arts.

## Art and conversation

Jenny Rutter describes the mission of *Fabrications* as “creating the projects around which we can start a conversation on creativity” (interview). *Fabrications*, based on the ‘magnificent ordinary’ of the commonplace occupations of weaving and dyeing, is dedicated to achieving a vision of the highest quality art with its roots in the community, the everyday experience of the local people and their personal histories and future aspirations, a ‘ladder’ of arts development. Claire Wellesley-Smith’s *Local Colour* project, for example, is an example of the creative process of conversation and practice turned into an art

*Growing local colour and using the plants in collaborative dyeing and textile making projects took us from bare soil to vibrant colour but also brought some vibrant conversation. Processes developed in ‘real time’ and were strongly connected to the heritage of the place. Alongside these processes came the conversations that occur through making, when the hands and brain are occupied. Initially conversations were about the textiles, the colours, caring for the plants. As the project progressed the group talked about life in Accrington today, about arrival, belonging, about connections made with people and with place.*  
(Claire Wellesley-Smith, artist, project report)

There is a similar line of thought expressed by Lisa Ryan and the *Shared Threads* project

*We talk about social issues, race, mental health, drugs and we can spend four hours doing this work and the time flies by and nobody has thought anything negative they have just enjoyed the experience of doing the art and being with people. Creative thought, it is repetitive motion and people don’t have to think.*  
(Lisa Ryan, artist, interview)

In this case, Ryan mentions the specific nature of textile work that includes and compares its repetitive movements and rhythms with the meditative creative process that combines a sense of craft with the arts. She alludes by implication to the benefits of working in community and according to the rhythms of the looms of days gone by.

This are fine examples of the extraordinary range of artistic process and output that was made available through *Fabrications*, positioning the festival as a driver of change and regeneration.

## Outcomes

Through *Fabrications* 2017 Super Slow Way has established new networks, relationships and partnerships which will be a platform for a sustainable textile biennial, going forward

It has achieved a diverse programme (from the small/local to large-scale/international) which can appeal to different stakeholders and offers audiences many entry points.

*Fabrications* has reanimated local interest in textile heritage and how to build on this creatively for future regional identity.

It has combined in a single programme high quality art and culture with socially engaged projects that focus on care and community.

In re-igniting public interest in historic buildings connected with the textile industry it has supported the idea of the possible re-opening and eventual regeneration of disused sites for future use.

Physical spaces that are emblematic of the region's past and pride in identity have been both supported and /or renovated through siting artworks there or responding to place through arts-based projects. These are essential elements of place-making for Pennine Lancashire.

Fabrications has commissioned art works that combine physical and conceptual responses to textiles and place, drawing in new audiences of people who do not regularly attend arts events.

The Fabrications festival has entwined art, the textile heritage of Burnley, the environment, social engagement, community, friendships, the mills, race, place and space.

## Legacy

The intention is to make the *Fabrications* festival a biennial event. In between festivals, work will continue to develop and bolster the development of local projects in the community, with a view to showcasing at the biennial event. Super Slow Way will continue to employ Jenny Rutter as producer and Director of Fabrications 2019, working to establish as an independent organisation, a Community Interest Company or a Company limited by Guarantee which can attract sponsorship, from a patchwork of funding sources. This will ensure a sustainable existence beyond the life of the Super Slow Way programme.

Plans to re-open and develop the Cotton Exchange in Blackburn have been given an injection of energy and innovative thinking as a result of its involvement with *Fabrications*. Similarly, the prospect of siting artworks in other significant buildings – whether disused mills or a cultural institutions such as Blackburn Museum – is stimulating new ideas about the potential for the region's cultural and architectural heritage.

## Conclusion

*Fabrications* has brought together past and present by using both physical heritage – in the form of iconic local architecture connected to the region's proud past based on the cotton industry – and a textile metaphor for the weaving together of community, repairing the social fabric of a region under duress. As part of this process, *Fabrications* brings together art and conversation, demystifying art and culture in an area where many have hardly ever experienced it. This open, generous and unpretentious objective is beautifully described in the words of Bella May Leonard describing an encounter with a newcomer to the art world, enticed by the desire to enter the well-loved space of the old Cotton Exchange:

*This guy who came in, quite timid, about my age, maybe his early thirties, said that he went to uni to do computing or something, and spent ages in the building, was really slow, then I went up to him and spoke to him because he said he had some questions, and he said that art at school was a joke, you had an hour to do art lessons, and so he never really had an interest in art, ... and I had to explain really basic things which I love because it makes me think again, what is art...? And he said 'yeah, but you can't sleep on these' [reference to the mattresses that form part of the art work]... or 'are you meant to sleep on this?' 'Oh no, no, it's not...'... but that's the whole point, it's a playful response, it's an opportunity to explore the expressive, ... in a factory setting it can be quite mundane and repetitive work, I'm taking these materials out and playing with them, exploring, ... and he really liked it... he didn't*

*know what to make of it at all... and I didn't know what to make out of his reaction... it was lovely...*

This is an instance of third space where artist, audience, art work and place have combined to generate new thinking. In other cases, audiences have been impressed by the commissioned show, *World Factory*, which was both participation and spectacle. This is emblematic of the range of tastes and possibilities the *Fabrications* programme is catering for. Overall, this festival with its potential to become a regular feature of the region has managed to strike a balance between high art, community conversation, cultural regeneration and place-making in ways that are exciting and promising for the future.