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An abstract painting featuring thick, expressive brushstrokes in vibrant colors: teal, orange, and purple, set against a black background. The strokes are layered and textured, creating a sense of movement and depth. The teal strokes are prominent in the upper and right portions, while orange strokes form a central, swirling pattern on the left. Purple strokes are concentrated in the lower right corner.

FREE-FOR-ALL

Harry Meadley

	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
	24	25	26
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 6:30pm-9:30pm FREE-FOR-ALL LAUNCH EVENT 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Jul 23rd-Aug 7th DANI GAINES & SUZANNE HALLIWELL: KINDRED SPIRITS 11:30am-2:30pm VOGUE FAMILY CRAFTS 12:30pm-1:30pm ATHENA 1pm-1:30pm FEELING FABULOUS DANCE WORKSHOP 2:30pm-3:30pm FAMILY VOGUE BALL 	27
	25	26	28
Monday	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Jul 23rd-Aug 7th DANI GAINES & SUZANNE HALLIWELL: KINDRED SPIRITS Jul 25th-26th GALLERIES CLOSED TO PUBLIC 1pm-3pm LIFE DRAWING CLASS 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 10:30am-12:30pm FAMILY HISTORY FOR BEGINNERS 9:30am-11:30am ACTION TOGETHER: VOLUNTEERING WORKSHOP 	29
	26	27	30
Tuesday	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aug 1 DANI GAINES & SUZANNE HALLIWELL: KINDRED SPIRITS Aug 1st-2nd GALLERIES CLOSED TO PUBLIC 2pm-4pm VINTAGE TEA DANCE 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aug 10th-21st EBOR STUDIO: FROM THE EDGE 2 10:30am-2:30pm GET UP AND GROW CERAMICS WORKSHOP 6pm-9pm TOUCHSTONES PICTUREHOUSE: THE LUNCHBOX (PG) 	31
	27	28	31
Wednesday	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aug 8th-9th GALLERIES CLOSED TO PUBLIC 1pm-3pm LIFE DRAWING CLASS 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aug 11th-12th DOG DAY AFTERNOON 11am-1:30am MEDITATION WITH MARCUS 1pm-2pm GO GONGS GONG BATH 	30
	28	29	31
Thursday	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aug 15th-16th GALLERIES CLOSED TO PUBLIC 12pm-2:30pm LGBTQ TEENS CREATIVE SESSION 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aug 18th-19th HANDSTAND WORKSHOP 10am-1pm CIRCUS SKILLS WORKSHOPS 	31
	29	30	31
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	30	31	24
Saturday	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aug 10th-21st EBOR STUDIO: FROM THE EDGE 2 10:30am-12:30pm FAMILY HISTORY FOR BEGINNERS 6pm-9pm TOUCHSTONES PICTUREHOUSE: THE FAMILY WAY (12) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aug 13th-14th RELAXING FAMILY ARTS & CRAFTS 1pm-3pm DESIGN YOUR OWN ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND 	25
	31	24	25
Sunday	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aug 15th-16th GALLERIES CLOSED TO PUBLIC 12pm-2:30pm LGBTQ TEENS CREATIVE SESSION 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aug 18th-19th HANDSTAND WORKSHOP 10am-1pm CIRCUS SKILLS WORKSHOPS 	26
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LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE

As an artist – one conversation you generally try to shy away from is about what “art” actually *is*. It’s a little uncool to talk in grand terms about art as something to do with philosophy, the sublime, metaphysics, or even to some extent, aesthetics, as many did in the past. These days it is maybe slightly more acceptable to talk about it in terms of social change, personal exploration of identity, or as critical discourse. But more often than not, it’s just good to avoid getting drawn into arguments about what *is* or *isn’t* to be considered “art”; with what *isn’t* usually being the point someone wants to make, and the art they are referring to being yours. If I were to attempt to simplify what art is for me: it is how I learn.

Firstly, as a viewer, I find the act of visiting exhibitions, looking at artworks, thinking about artworks, talking about artworks... all part of a process that has helped me not just be informed about, but actually better understand all sorts of histories, cultures, ideas, emotions, perspectives and perceptions. Artworks, and the work of artists, have taught me many things that the more traditional or conventional forms of education had sometimes struggled to do. Art is often more *show* than *tell*, and just being told things doesn’t always sink in – sometimes it just has to be put in front of you.

Then secondly, as an artist, this is your own investigation. You learn through making. You learn through doing. Though we often picture “experimental art” as some sort of whacky, mixed up, visually chaotic thing – in actuality – almost all art making is an experiment. Whether the process challenges you to think, or the outcome is something to reflect upon, or you just want to see “what happens if I do this?”, the pursuit of art is often the pursuit of learning, and the pursuit of sharing that learning. However, this sense of *art as self-education* starts to become harder to rationalise once you have the responsibility of delivering public facing projects with expected outcomes that are funded by large institutions (especially if it is public money). This creates an environment where there is an expectation that you should know what you’re doing and pressure to achieve whatever aims there are. This is fair, but the fear of making any mistakes can radically limit the potential to then learn from them – partly the reason why it becomes harder for larger institutions to change. From my experience, you usually only really learn something when you learn it the hard way...

This publication is an attempt to share some of this learning that either informed, or has been informed by, a project / exhibition I did at Touchstones, Rochdale in the summer of 2022. Called *Free-for-All*, the idea was that it would essentially be that – a free-for-all. Anyone who lived in the Borough of Rochdale could approach the gallery to exhibit in, occupy, or use any of the four main (and quite large) gallery spaces however they want. It was a total unknown as to how this would be received, play out, be managed, or whether it would be a total disaster. The only real rule was that, whatever happened, it had to be free to attend.

Free-for-All was kindly funded by Arcon Housing, who have been working with Touchstones to develop relationships with local housing association tenants, and Art Fund’s *Reimagine* grant that explicitly supported the gallery to ‘reimagine’ their activities following the pandemic – something that has reduced visitor figures to galleries and museums nationally. This somewhat alleviated the common stresses of expected outcomes, as *Free-for-All* was very much framed as a trial; an experiment for the gallery to learn from. But I guess the question then becomes, what is the experiment?

To share a bit of backstory and an experience that very much informed *Free-for-All*, in 2019 I worked with Touchstones on another project / exhibition called *But what if we tried?*. I will discuss this a bit more in the chapter ‘Collections & Community Centres’ but in essence it was about exhibiting as much of Touchstones’ 1500+ artwork collection in a single exhibition; though ultimately raised questions about public ownership and the value of preserving it. Municipal art and museum collections seem like they belong to the galleries and museums that preside over them but – when it comes down to it – they are ultimately owned by the public. This is something that maybe gets slightly forgotten, and equally forgotten, is that the gallery itself is also publicly owned. When galleries nationally are seeking to increase connections and engagement with their local communities, many of whom historically feel alienated or excluded from them. A possible solution to consider might be: If the people own it, why not let them use it?

Whilst *But what if we tried?* was on, I had the privilege to be invited to undertake a short residency at Jatiwangi Art Factory in West Java. Occupying an ex-roof tile factory in the rural village of Jatiwangi (though with a population of 80,000+, “village” might not be the right word), JaF, as it is more easily referred to, operates as an art space and artist collective that is fully embedded within its surrounding community. JaF is worthy of their own anthology series to begin covering the vast array of things they do, but the immediately most striking thing, to me at least, was that the actual building – the art factory – was permanently open, and by open, I mean it doesn’t even have a door. Every day people were coming and going,

using the vast space under the renovated metal roof (a symbol itself of the declining roof tile industry in that area) for their own personal or collective use. Drying rice harvests, dance recitals, fixing cars, playing table tennis, just hanging out, every day I was there multiple different people were doing various different things at almost all times of day. One day there was even a national meet-up of motorcycle clubs and a display of their custom recycled motorbikes. Then in the evening there was performance by a particularly excellent Sundanese Bob Marley cover band. I'm a pretty easily enthused person but it's fair to say it was totally magical.

The benefit of their space being shared in this way is not just for those who use it, as the generosity is reciprocated whenever JaF want to do anything themselves. There are always people around who are happy to help and to get things done. Even really ambitious things can be achieved quite spontaneously. As much as I would love to see something like JaF exist in a UK context, the reality is that the bureaucracy and risk aversion of any sort of British institution would make it impossible. *Free-for-All* felt like a chance to try see if we could recreate some of that magic at Touchstones, albeit in some sort of limited or more permissible fashion.

The experiment, then, was what would happen if you tried to make the gallery itself as open to people as possible to use for themselves? Though more specifically – what if you inverted the traditional hierarchy of the “community programme”, often annexed to a smaller gallery space within the building, so that it instead takes over the “main” gallery spaces? (In the case of Touchstones it is called *Your Space*, and in all fairness is a pretty decent sized and very visible room near the entrance to the building). What if you treated the gallery like a community centre, or rather, a centre for community centres – a central space for the various organisations and initiatives already doing amazing work out in their various communities, though often quite invisibly? What if you just let anyone display their artwork? Can you be inclusive of everyone? And maybe most vitally, how on Earth can a small team of staff, with very limited resources, possibly support such a wild idea?

Above all, I have to thank, or maybe more appropriately – apologise to, the Touchstones Team. For many visitors to galleries and museums they see big, often intimidating buildings (Touchstones' Victorian, almost Cathedral-like building being a prime example) and many think of them as “big” institutions. The reality is though, that they are run by incredibly dedicated, under rewarded small teams of people who go above and beyond to achieve very ambitious things under very difficult circumstances. I hope they can forgive me.

With a project like *Free-for-All*, the role of the audience is more obviously inverted to become one of participant, artist, or performer; the flip-side of that inversion is that it is then the institution, myself as the artist, and (hopefully) the wider arts sector who then become the audience. We are there to learn from what the public chooses to show us. So what then did we learn?

It is difficult for me to speak on behalf of Touchstones, who have their own internal processes, and I hope that producing something like this might begin to introduce the project to other arts professionals more widely. As the person ultimately responsible for the project, there would be too much bias in attempting to properly evaluate or report on it myself; but as an addendum to my texts you will find an abridged version of the third-party evaluation report carried out by Kate Wafer of Wafer Hadley using the FailSpace method that focuses on openly learning from failure (in short: visitors, participants and partners seemed to really like it, it improved their connection to the gallery and sense of belonging in Rochdale; it could have better encouraged people to participate and didn't get as many “unsolicited” proposals as hoped; it could have been better marketed and would have benefited from a longer development period; it was incredibly stressful for the staff; but reassuringly, almost everyone involved would like to see it happen again).

What I have attempted to do – and in what I hope you find to be accessible language – is discuss what felt like the ten main “lessons” we could think about taking from *Free-for-All*. I will try to articulate some of the previous experiences that lead to certain decisions we ended up making in how to facilitate something this un-facilitate-able; analyse some of the processes involved; offer commentary on some broader issues affecting artists and galleries; and suggest some ideas which, if adopted, might hopefully have a positive impact elsewhere.

To quickly list them, they are:

1. Let young people mess up the gallery.
2. Avoid elitist practices such as the “private view”.
3. Make “open shows” actually open.
4. Documenting participatory projects is very complicated.
5. Share your collection with others.
6. Let people bring their dogs into the gallery.
7. Avoid things being too fragile.
8. Let people use the gallery when its not open to the public.
9. Offer different ideas of what art can be.
10. Generosity is a reciprocal act.

Many of the points raised are relatively obvious, not necessarily new, but maybe in their straightforwardness are sometimes overlooked. It's important not to lose sight of our core values, or rather, it is sometimes good just to reevaluate what our values really are.

Finally, something that did not make sense to address as a lesson learnt, but something always worth considering, is the main criticism *Free-for-All* (or at least I) received. Though not a massive point of contention – as most people seemed to embrace the playful, although pretty critical, gesture being made about access and ownership of civic space – some people did read the intention behind it as arguing for the removal of the artist, the removal of the curator, or the diminishing of “quality” over quantity. If you view *Free-for-All* as an either/or, i.e. you either have the traditional model of established artists and curated exhibitions, or, you turn the gallery into a community centre (which only after someone said despairingly to me did I realise is basically what I was doing), then it maybe does come across that way. The response, I think, is a simple one: in the 48 days *Free-for-All* was open to the public 48 different events, activities, workshops, screenings, performances and exhibitions took place by various local people, groups and organisations; over 150 people of all ages and abilities formally displayed their artworks (with countless others informally displaying things too); no one had to make a proposal or submit a portfolio, no studio visits had to happen, no one had to apply for funding – anyone could take part. The remaining three hundred or so days of the year, if you want, can be back business as usual. Or if we do go all out... maybe we acknowledge that if we want to encourage a society that has more artists, more creative people, more chance for cultural activity to develop and thrive, more opportunities to see what each other are up to, more space to play in, more space to be together; then municipal art galleries such as Touchstones might be a good place to start, and it will be the curators and artists whom we depend on to instigate it. I don't in any way want to claim I can answer or solve any of these issues, if anything as an artist all you do is keep creating more problems. All I can wish for is that there might be something to be learnt from all this, or that you enjoy the experience of reading it.

In the words of Bob Marley, serendipitously led as a sing-a-long by Voice Assembly at the *Free-for-All* final celebration event...

Let's get together and feel alright.

With special thanks to everyone who contributed to *Free-for-All*; they were:

Dani Burke, Aysha Afzal, Chloe Baker, Ruby Burnside, Bethany Corbely, Reece Gamson, Thomas Gamson, Emma Heath, Kian Jackson, Aiza Javid, Subhan Javid, Jessica Taylor, Suzanne Halliwell, Dani Gaines, Helen Chicot and Oakenhoof Folk Arts, Paul McNamara, Janette Crowe, Richard Lord, Joanna Pearson, Dr David Cornforth, Adrienne Heywood, Blaine Bennett, Mary Hughes, Jacqueline Daly, Rebecca Cloarer, Stephen Frederick, Alyssa Holt, Paul Bottomley, Katie Bridges, Nataliya Nikolova, Graham Latiner, Jackie Wilkie, Janna May, Sandra Williams, Valerie Bracken, Patricia Haughton, Gary Canning, Cate Arnfield, David Greenwood, David Flood, Charles Saul, Doodlher, Jane Marie Brown, Gary Stockport, Arianna, David Gunby, Louisa May Parker and Kelly Munrow-Fawcett and Red Bobble Arts, Darren Pritchard and House of Ghetto, Erica Matthews, Nichelle Cutler and Action Together, Jennifer Vickers, Paul Shelby, Ian Aitchison, Keisha James, Karen Lyons, Paul Haywood, Babs Smith, Violet Flamingo, Cheryl Beswick, Alison Cooper, Bob France, Ellie Waters, Maryanne Royle, Martha Lyons Haywood, Burning Salt, Hayley Watson, Michelle Garrity, Marcus Abraham, Ondray Botkovele, Mr Ali and the Asian LGTB group, Liz Steele and CrossFit Fixus, David Allen and Skylight Circus, Martine Bradford, Jennifer Vickers, Christopher Tyler, Minty Barlow, Candice, Karen Haynes, Mandy Bradley, Cath, Robyn Chicot, Rebecca Bradley, Susan Hanson, Sam Mendes, Haadiyah Hussain, Philip Bauckham, Lottie, David, Joan Eccles, Eunice Odgen, Patsy Allen, Jane Holmes, Donna Bennett, Tasmin, Ange Shepherd, Lynne Donoghue, Neil Seville, Julie Brogden, Malika Choudhury, Nadia Nazir, Roy Simmonds, Erica Matthews, Jasmine, Jen Lowe, Simran Yasin, Women in Touch Group Rochdale, Joanne Barker-Marsh, Neil Bamford, Henry, Sandra Lomas, Jennifer Wong, Jenny Buckley, James Hope, Tem Powell, Sabrina Owen, Doreen Parkinson, Prince David Abiola, Emma, Barbara Bauckham, Elizabeth White, Tom Holland, Barbara Jones, Holly Whitehouse, Peter King, Lee Pick, Tricias Duckling Childminding, Simon, Ryan Gunby, Eric Barker, Gordon Emerson, Will Setchell, Bryan Yates, Peter Gunby, Ethan Gunby, Heather Howard, Roger Tuisley, Emily, Olga Dmytrenko, Ronnie Wildman, Phyllis Jackson, Samantha Wong, Mary, Felix, Muhammad Ali Hussain, Mariam Nazar, Irene Bujanowska, Mohammed Al-Zain, Ethan, Bowlee Community Organisation, Caroline Farrington, Arty Cox, Kaitlyn Stockport, Mary Oluwabukola Adekugbe and the Nigeria Community Association, Asma Begum, Becky Smyllie, Kila, Bethany Rose, Lee Tarrant, Lorna McFarland, Tim Buckley, Kathryn Nolan, Women in Deeplish, Patricia Clarke, Liz Brookes, Jon-Paul, Spencer Turner, David Greenwood, David Street, Victoria Romero, Oliver Jackson, Louise Kay and Voice Assembly, Mimosa Percy-Rouhaud, Lili Rushton, Anthony Wright, Diana Terry, Catherine Hill, Anne Al-Othman, Joshua Phillips, Amanda Ryan, Jasmine, Joga Singh and the many, many others who's names I did not catch.

LETTING THE KIDS LOOSE



Creative Teens is a free art group run by artist Dani Burke that regularly meet in Castleton Library and are particularly welcoming to shy and anxious teenagers. Dani has set up various art groups in the borough and runs them in her own time and off her own back, often auctioning her own paintings to help fund the various group activities and materials. It felt important to not only acknowledge the vital and positive role such generous and interpersonal efforts can have in supporting the creative and personal development of young people (as well as the significant role local Libraries play in providing free and usable space) but to offer a chance for this small group to produce something for the largest gallery space in Touchstones.

Gallery 4, as it is known, is a huge, single, rectangular gallery space, with a particularly long 22.5m feature wall, all set under a vaulted ceiling and Victorian cornicing. It is a spectacular room, and due to the way Touchstones is laid out, is the final gallery space a visitor reaches, making it have a sort of big reveal, or *grande finale* feel to it.

For *Free-for-All*, it was obvious early on that this space is where some of the larger events people had ideas for would have to be hosted – a ceilidh, a vogue ball, a tea dance, a clothes swap... a space where you could fit trapeze equipment or a petting zoo (one of the things I'm very sad didn't come to fruition). It was to become a sort of civic hall, a freely available large space for people to put on bigger events; though in-between these events, could also function like a sports hall or youth centre, where people could sit and make things or play about – what it didn't need to feel like was a big, white gallery space.

Rochdale has quite an active graffiti community, and in the past the gallery had done a popular project where various street artists came in and spray painted all over the gallery walls. This seemed like something nice to revisit, though not necessarily to replicate, so what emerged was the plan to work with a local graffiti artist to produce a large mural based on the ideas and

artworks of the Creative Teens group. One week the group came to visit the gallery and the museum store with the idea that the next week they would make paintings and drawings in response to their visit (though in fact, being caring young people, decided to focus more on environmental issues); these images would then be translated by the graffiti artist onto the wall. It would hopefully break down the austerity of the gallery space, add a youthful energy, and still be visually engaging. What we didn't plan on was the graffiti artist refusing to draw a rainbow...

After quickly ejecting said graffiti artist and their very dubious opinions about homosexuality (the only act of censorship required in the whole of *Free-for-All*) we were left with a large feature wall partially covered in base layers of emulsion paint (very kindly donated by Arcon Housing) and the outlines of a sea turtle that looked radically different to the original painted by one of the Creative Teens. It was less than two weeks until the exhibition was supposed to open, and only five days until the Creative Teens were set to come in and help finish the wall off with their own additions.

Initially the team started ringing round to see if we could get another graffiti artist at short notice, though this wasn't looking promising. Very quickly it became apparent we would just have to do it ourselves. Dani, though a practiced painter, had never used spray paint before, and I had to try tune back into my nine year old self who had a brief turn doing graffiti all over a soon to be demolished tower block near where I grew up. With little choice, we ordered a bunch of water-based spray paints and got to work. Having not painted or drawn for years, let alone spray painted, I actually ended up having an amazing time working on this. It felt like I had a new calling! Now I was the one in charge of the design, I decided to more honestly replicate the various designs by the Creative Teens in order to retain their original charm. With different members of the team chipping in throughout the week, we filled the wall just in time for the Creative Teens arrival.

It was Saturday morning and bit by bit the *Teens* arrived at the gallery. Though quite shy at first, they were all excited to see just how large their paintings had now been made, and even set about FaceTiming some of the other members of the group who were away visiting family in another country. They were very hesitant to spray paint over the top of the mural and were worried about messing up all the hard work we'd clearly had to put into it. They didn't even want to tag their names on it and started to seem quite anxious about what they might do. Thankfully when you are "the artist" you get to make rash decisions (otherwise known as artistic license) and I couldn't help but notice there were still loads of other empty white walls in Gallery 4. Let's just *let them loose* on those walls, I thought.

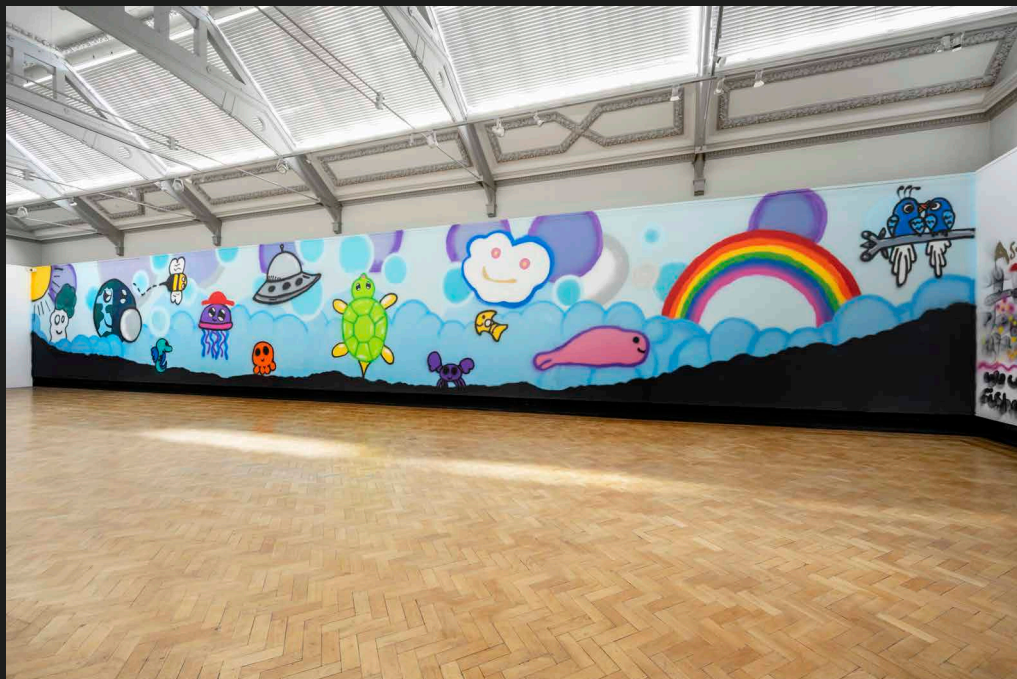
Minutes later and the group were dancing around the gallery, running about, spraying here, there and everywhere all over Gallery 4. Messages of inclusivity and concern for the planet, colourful shapes, thick paint drips, and a beautifully rendered 'don't worry be happy' which I took as a personal note whilst seeing paint getting onto wooden doorframes and all over the floor (it did turn out to clean off surprisingly easily). No pre-design process, nor limits on what they could or couldn't write or draw, just *let them have fun*. Two of the teens filmed a TikTok dance routine, others started to look for other things to spray paint – the gallery bench that had just been pristinely re-painted by one of the technicians fell victim. Some went off to the café for a break, confidently coming and going through the barriers separating the closed gallery space like they were velvet VIP ropes. Quite simply, you could tell they felt at home, they had made the space their own.

If it weren't for every can of spray paint completely running out I honestly don't know how we would have got them out of there. For a group of supposedly shy and anxious teenagers, this somewhat chaotic act of letting them spray paint all over Gallery 4 created an experience that clearly transformed their immediate relationship to the gallery space, but hopefully also in the long term. I would regularly see members of the Creative Teens returning to *Free-for-All* with different family and friends, casually waltzing in and out of the gallery like they owned the place, a notable difference from their arrival that first Saturday morning.

Afterwards, the large mural we'd spent a week working on, though still quite nice, seemed much less engaging than the other more chaotic walls filled by the Teens. I wished we'd just let them fill the whole space from the start, though part of me wonders had they not already had their images so big in the gallery already, or had we not made the effort on their behalf, would they have been as receptive, or felt as permitted? In terms of *Free-for-All*, it felt like a successful proof of concept: let people make their own contribution to the gallery, and this then generates a personal connection to the gallery. Just imagine if every young person had the opportunity to spray paint all over their local art gallery like this.

There is maybe another lesson to be learnt here about graffiti – and this is coming from someone who spent a week having the time of their life painting a giant wall – it's really, really fun. As much as we might get annoyed to see graffiti appear on the sides of our houses, or on our workplaces, and interpret it as a hostile act of vandalism, it might actually be the case that it's just a way for someone to have fun, that they might not otherwise be afforded, or is a way of someone trying to say "I belong here".

The one thing almost every gallery has is walls...



FAMILY DO INSTEAD OF A PRIVATE VIEW

As a Fine Art lecturer, one thing you find yourself having to explain to new students, when encouraging them to start going to exhibition openings, is that even though they are sometimes called “private views” this doesn’t actually mean they are private. Notwithstanding the rare occasion of an actually private, private view (that generally aren’t publicly advertised), most galleries, whether public, artist-led, or commercial, usually want their openings to be well attended. Quite rightly, students usually point out that calling a non-private, private view “private” doesn’t make much sense. This then commonly leads to a conversation about how un-inclusive such practices are and how it perpetuates an elitist perception of the art world. All galleries know this, most artists know this, everyone who knows ‘private view’ doesn’t mean *private* view know this... and if you didn’t know already, you now know this.

Even once you’ve got past that first barrier (knowing what a private view isn’t private), knowing what happens, how long you’ll spend there, who else will be there, what to wear or what happens after, are all rather mysterious until you’ve been to a few – and even then there are variations depending on the type of gallery that is hosting it. Though to quickly answer: people standing around talking to each other and saying they will have to come back to look at the work properly another time, though likely won’t; usually about one to two hours, or until the drinks run out; a lot of the same people who were at the last private view plus a few uncertain art students; it usually doesn’t matter how you’ve dressed as most people keep their coats on (its either cold or there’s nowhere to put your coat); everyone goes to a nearby pub, or at the higher end, most people go to a nearby pub whilst the people invited to the private dinner (which is actually private) go to that, who then go to a nearby pub. Admittedly, it was only after eventually stopping drinking myself that I became more uncomfortable and uncertain about these routines. And to put it more bluntly – someone genuinely once said to me that you should judge the success of a private view based on “how old the men are, and young the women are”. Yet we – and this includes me – still tell art students, who are predominately young women, that it is necessary to start going to them in order to build a career.

More galleries now call them “exhibitions openings”, which is a good, albeit small, step forward. There is clearly a better sense amongst the more progressive publicly funded institutions that breaking down traditionally elitist art world structures such as the private view is a healthy way forward but I feel there maybe needs to be a more fundamental re-think about what we (the contemporary art community) keep perpetuating. I, for one, don’t wish to encourage or enable young people wishing to become artists into having drinking problems. Something that was very much the case for my generation.

At the ‘launch event’ for *Free-for-All*, a recurring point of conversation kept coming up: “this doesn’t feel like a private view”, and everyone meant it in a really positive way. There was a buffet, live folk music, tables and chairs (you could actually sit down!), an attempt to get people dancing in a ceilidh (as the artist I couldn’t get out of it, though like everyone else brave enough, ended up having a great time), kids running about excitedly, and at one point there was even a makeshift assault course in Gallery 4. There was alcohol present, but people weren’t nervously blazing through it like normal and keen to head off to the pub – they seemingly just wanted to stay in the gallery. I don’t think the Front of House team had everyone out until after half ten, or even later. I’ve been to hundreds of private views and I’ve never witnessed such a thing. It felt like being at some sort of family function, a wedding or significant birthday, but in this case it was mainly a bunch of strangers. I can’t speak for everyone, or really anyone, but it felt special; special in a way that was also totally normal and familiar, maybe special because it was normal and familiar. I’d like to say it was a carefully conceived strategy to make the gallery more inclusive, accessible, and to breakdown the elitism of art world practices, which to some degree it was, but more than that we just earnestly wanted people to have a good time.

Private views, looked at favourably, are a chance for the artist, or artists, their friends and family, the curators, gallery staff and other well wishers to celebrate the achievement of putting together an exhibition – something which even on a small scale can be the result of years of work. It is a moment to give special attention and congratulations to artistic pursuit itself, and is the main social and professional structure for any given place’s artistic community. They are the way in, and they make you feel a part of it. In small artist-led spaces and commercial galleries, it makes sense that these sort of events can stay relatively exclusive, but when it comes to the larger public galleries, municipal art galleries, if we want more members of our wider community to join in, as many artists and galleries will say they do, we really need to start making the way in easier, friendlier, much more fun (without alcohol), child-friendly, and meaningful. We have to make openings less for us, and more for everyone.



OPEN HOUSE

One of my favourite memories of visiting a gallery involved the gallery having nothing in it. This was not the famous *Voids, A Retrospective* show at the Pompidou, Paris in 2009 that presented a survey of artworks that involved empty gallery spaces throughout a series of empty gallery spaces (though I do wish I had seen that) but rather what the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam called their 'Open House'. In 2011 the Stedelijk closed their doors for over a year whilst renovations were done and a new wing built. In May of 2012 they opened the gallery for a single day to let the public see the completed building works prior to the official re-opening later in the year. No artworks had yet been installed, all that was on display was the building and its many empty gallery spaces.

Coincidentally, I was in Amsterdam installing a small solo show at the time and having heard talk of the Open House curiously went along to have a look. Other than the novel surprise that there was now an escalator in the gallery (a status symbol for major art museums) I had an overwhelmingly amazing experience in which I found myself as a young, ambitious artist mentally projecting all sorts of ideas and dreams of artworks throughout the many, and massive, gallery spaces. This was something I'd already been doing for a while when visiting new galleries – imagining what I would do, instead of whatever was actually on show – but with the complete absence of other artworks in the entire gallery, it stretched my imagination further and further the more I kept exploring. By the time I got to their new subterranean gallery space, a single 1100m² room with super high ceilings, which is up there with some of the largest single white cube gallery spaces in the world, I was running out of ideas. Though whilst we're on this subject, my idea for the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall (which is three times the size) would be to install a mega ramp in it – see X Games, or when skateboarder Danny Way jumped over the Great Wall of China. The proportions of the Turbine Hall fit perfectly to the proportions of the ramp, even the raised platform in the middle where visitors look out into the main hall fits perfectly as the section to be jumped over. Just imagine!

This act of projecting your imagination into the gallery is one of the true joys of being an artist. When you finally get to the point of being invited to do an exhibition somewhere – even if it is a small room in a basement such as the show I was installing at the time – considering the space itself, what

you might do, where certain works will go, how might an audience move throughout it, what surprises it might hold, all this stuff is super exciting (and admittedly sometimes terrifying). When thinking through an exhibition, even if I've already made a pretty clear plan for how things will fit together, I will walk through the space back and forth, round and round, visualising how it will work. For me, the best point to do this is when the space is totally empty (or empty enough) once the last show has been taken down and just before install for the next one properly begins. This, unfortunately, is the main point when the public aren't allowed into the gallery.

Touchstones for many years hosted an annual *Peoples' Art* exhibition, an open show in which members of the public could submit their artworks to be considered for selection. It felt in keeping with *Free-for-All* to draw upon this legacy and instate something similar, however, as this was a free-for-all after all, there would be no selection. *We Want Your Art*, as the gallery dubbed it, involved having a series of drop-off dates, some before the exhibition, some during, where anyone could come in, hand over their artwork and it would be put up in the gallery for the remainder of the show. We gave over the second largest gallery space, Gallery 2, the first main space you enter, to hopefully fit this all in.

After the first couple of drop-off days, before the exhibition actually opened, we had about thirty or so works given in. This was a good start but didn't initially fill us with confidence that the remaining two drop-off days would yield enough works to fill the entire space. Maybe it could have been better promoted, maybe people were slightly cautious of the idea of *Free-for-All*, maybe the lack of selection actually put people off, maybe the guidelines about what could be submitted were too narrow, maybe there weren't as many people eager to exhibit their lock-down creations as the recent Rochdale Public Health Report lead us to believe, or maybe we just needed to not worry, open *Free-for-All*, talk to people, and see what happens? In the meantime, however, we needed to install the works we had.

I decided to mix in the paintings made by the Creative Teens for the mural in Gallery 4, to introduce a subtle foreshadowing, but also to help bulk it out. Then came the question of where to install them? Spread them out? Bunch them together? Start from the middle and work outwards, or start from one end? We wanted to give presence and respect the works already given in, but also allow the space to still feel empty enough that others would be encouraged to help fill it. In the end we started a salon-style hang beginning from the far end the gallery – so that as you enter the room it appeared to be completely empty. On one hand this felt like a risk, that it almost looked like "this is all we got", but on the other, if the gallery felt too full, would more people feel encouraged to add their own?

After the final drop-off day, and of course also accepting any submission that came in at any other time, somewhat eerily, there ended up being the perfect number and size of works to run the salon hang round the entire of Gallery 2 ending just where the large digital screen (actually left in place from the previous exhibition) had been used to present the rolling calendar of upcoming events taking place as part of *Free-for-All*. In the end there were well over a hundred works, and even a few three dimensional works that helped fill the glass display cabinets (also left over from the previous exhibition). But more importantly, with each work came a new personal connection to the gallery, and in many cases they also came with a story: Someone who had been obsessively drawing their whole life, but never shown their work to anyone; another brought in the first painting they had ever done, which they had made during lockdown; some were first paintings by babies; another, who has been making three-dimensional digital reconstructions of Rochdale town centre at different points through the last few centuries, brought in some printed screen grabs; in one case, a support worker brought in a painting by an elderly gentleman who was in a hospice at the time, who had apparently always dreamed of having his work in the gallery – he died during the exhibition, but was able to be shown images of his work on the gallery wall not long before his passing.

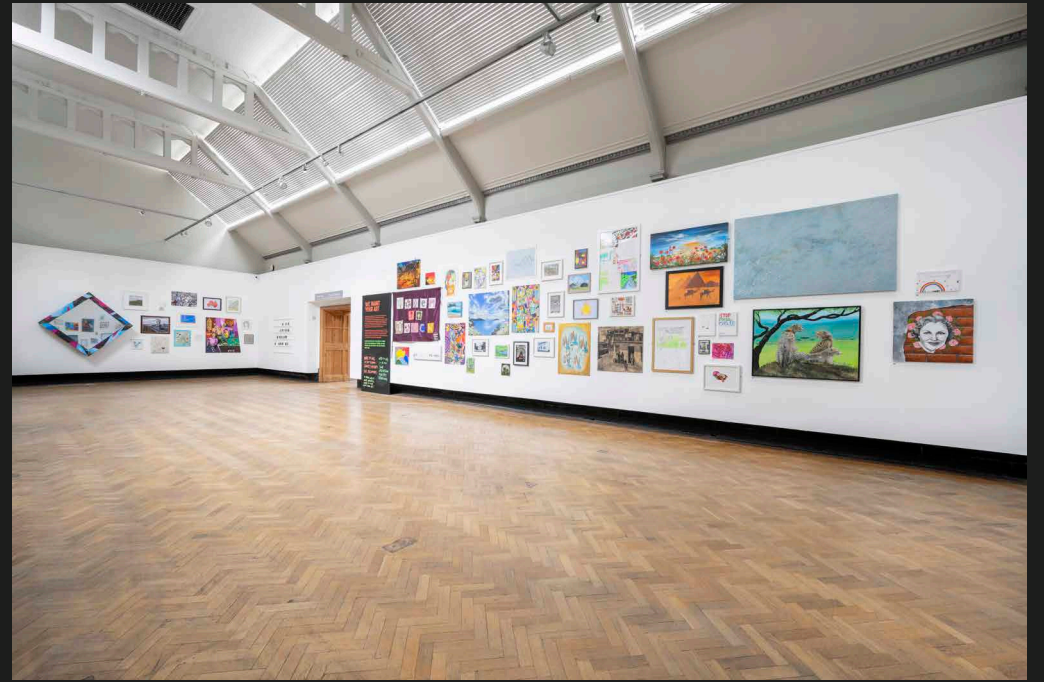
Personally, my favourite submission was by a young kid who was part of one of the Holiday Activity Fund groups that made use of *Free-for-All* as a workshop and free school dinner space during the summer holiday – something Touchstones itself was also doing. Upon encountering the group in the gallery and introducing myself as the artist behind the exhibition, he came over, handed me a great picture he'd just made – a cut-out blue paper dolphin in front of a hand-drawn felt-tip wave – and told me he didn't want to add it to the wall where anyone could peg up their own creations in Gallery 4, which all the other kids had done, but that it needed to go up in the proper show in Gallery 2. An *artist in the making*, I thought; how could I not oblige?

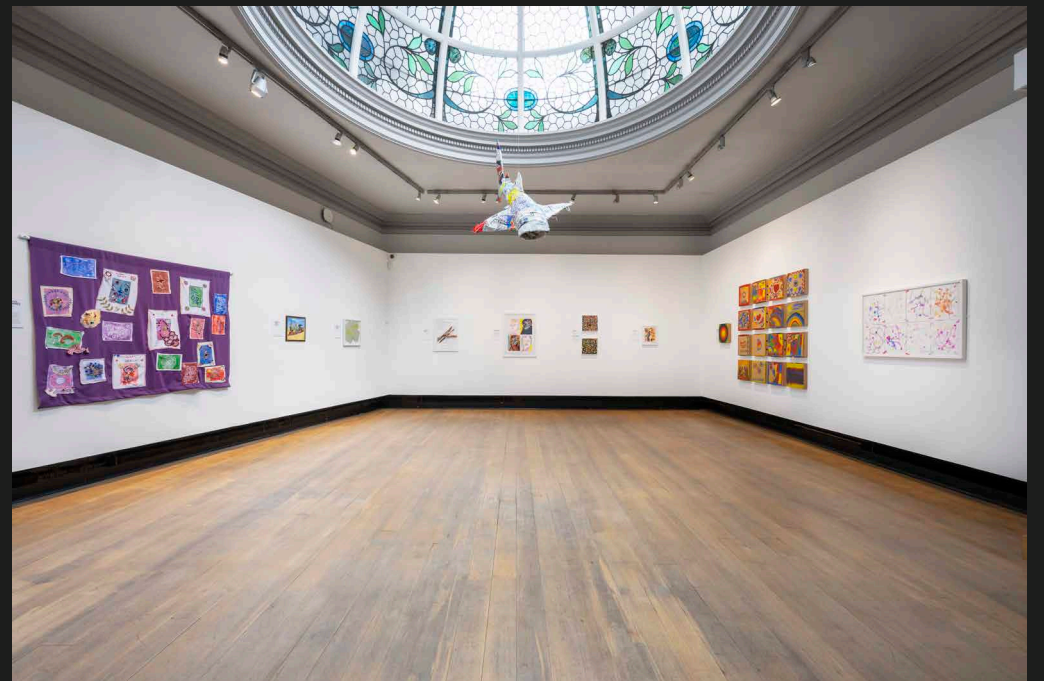
Open Shows are open in the sense that they are a rare chance people can actually get their work in their local gallery, or open in the sense that they almost always have selectors and with that selection comes a natural sense of success or failure for those who submit – the failure being a signal to people that their work isn't "good enough". Open Shows are a complex thing in and of themselves for a gallery to decide to do, in theory they offer a chance for community engagement and inclusion, though when done regularly, see a lot of the same names and style of work and can become a little repetitive. They are generally quite good for the people who get their work in them, but wider audiences are sometimes less interested, and again, anyone who is not selected, will have a negative connection to the gallery. I feel *We Want Your Art* got around some of this by not having any selection

barrier, and by actually being ongoing, encouraged quite a few people to add their works who might not have otherwise thought their work had a place, or who were outside of the mailing lists and social media posts that acted as the initial open call.

So here is my suggestion for any gallery considering doing an open show in future – make it as open as possible. Don't have selectors, don't have a submission date, don't say what mediums will or won't be accepted. Just say "between these dates, bring or send your work – whatever it is – to the gallery and we will display it", keep as much space free as possible as it goes on, and if your gallery gets too full, start to take some of the earlier stuff out. You could do this for a week, or you could do this for a decade, though always make sure to have the empty space for people to project their own imaginations on to. Make it an open house.







DIFFICULTIES OF DOCUMENTATION

Artists at the best of times are concerned with the documentation of their work, and I can say this from both the position of an artist myself, as well as someone who makes a decent side-income taking photographs of other people's exhibitions (sometimes even being paid more than the artists on show). As exhibitions often only last a few months, the documentation of it, which will have a life beyond that initial duration, ultimately comes to be the main record of it. This is of course a pretty obvious statement but the implications it has on artistic thinking and practices, let alone careers, can be quite insidious.

I for one, have encouraged and advised younger artists and art students that doing exhibitions, even if hardly anyone comes to see them in person, has as much, if not more, potential value in its (well) documented form. And this is true. Fundamentally, the true value is as a learning experience, but pragmatically, more people will often see online images of an exhibition than see it in person, and you can use that documentation in your portfolio or for applying to various opportunities. When you then get an opportunity, the gallery or whoever, will want images of your previous work for use with marketing. Good quality, visually striking images have a high currency and if your last bunch of works look sort of like your new body of work, then all the more helpful.

Naturally, the advent of social media has had a massive impact on this (which I won't dwell on here) but if anything just accelerated a trend that has always been there – the postcard in the gift shop being one example. Most artists know that visually engaging work, that is also well reproducible, will increase the marketability, popularity, and saleability of their work. Achieving a recognisable "style" or a self-branding aesthetic are desirable goals for a professional artist. Unfortunately though, in many cases this often traps artists into repetitive, unadventurous practices, that though financially beneficial, eventually becomes formulaic and tired. Then beyond that, the work which lends itself visually to documentation and reproduction, gains greater influence by being the more easily accessible images for people

to encounter. This then sets a greater precedent for what the wider public understands to be "Art" (or not). The visual language of how exhibitions and artworks are photographed is even more formulaic, and making / arranging your work to successfully operate within that formula is a skill many artists seek to develop. From years of learning to photograph my own exhibitions, and then being hired to document others, I can tell you the one thing that is a real problem: anything that moves.

The technical reason for this is generally when photographing exhibitions and artworks you want as much of the image to be in focus, sharp, and not grainy. As soon as you have to photograph something moving, and not have motion blur, you have to increase the shutter speed. To compensate for this you either have to widen the aperture (in which case the background will go blurry), increase the ISO (which makes the image grainy) or you can use a flash (but to make this look good requires the luxury of time you often don't have when things are in motion). Also, much of getting "good" images of exhibitions and artworks depends very much on carefully positioning the camera to get totally straight, square, and where possible symmetrical shots. You almost never take a photograph without a tripod; I even use a shutter release cable as pressing the shutter button on a tripod-mounted camera directly can cause the slightest of wobble meaning an ever-so blurry image.

The practical reason is that generally in this context when something is moving, it is a person. Yes, there is the occasional kinetic sculpture, though in these cases the artist usually wants versions with and without motion blur, and because generally kinetic sculptures' movements loop, once you're set up you just have to take a bunch of shots until one comes out which looks nice. There are also video works, but with these, to compensate for the difference in light levels (bright projection in dark room for example), you usually have to take multiple exposures at different light levels and then stitch them together in photoshop. Or more commonly, the artist or gallery emails you digital video stills of the video work and you superimpose them into the image. This saves a lot of time and has the added benefit of you not needing to guess / wait through the work multiple times to pick out the better stills from the film.

In the more unusual case of *Free-for-All*, the exhibition itself moves. Gallery 1 has different exhibitions every other week, artworks are continually added to Gallery 2, different works from the collection are brought in and out of Gallery 3, and Gallery 4 has different big events happening all the time – and this is ignoring the continual movement of tables and chairs throughout all the gallery spaces for the different workshops and activities. There is no one version of the exhibition, and this is even without the presence of participants or visitors.

But really it's when you have to photograph people that things are a real challenge. It's bad enough when the artist or gallery want shots of people walking through the gallery, or next to a work for scale. More often than not it is a member of staff forced to take up this role, their back turned to the camera, or repeatedly sent back and forth so you can get just the right amount of motion blur to show there is a person there but so you can't make out any discernible features. Sometimes you have to rely on visitors to fulfil this role, though this is something I personally don't like having to do: them being in the images, or having to ask their permission. Performance works are always a real challenge and usually I tend to avoid such jobs. The absolute hardest, however, are participatory works. Not only are there usually tables and chairs all over the place so you can't place yourself in a good position to get a nice composition but you have to use your camera's auto-settings, which rarely produce nice results, things are constantly happening that you keep missing and people often look at the camera when they know you're taking a photo which totally ruins the moment and likely makes the image unusable. Nothing breaks the sense of engagement like the breaking of the fourth wall.

The real problem, and the real reason, however, is an ethical one.

As I have a teaching job within a university, and what I produce as an artist counts towards what is termed "research", I am required to receive ethical approval from within the institution to ensure that what I am doing will not cause any adverse harm to anyone involved, and be carried out with care and consideration. Generally, if you're just reading and writing about the work of others, or making things in your studio, this is a relatively straightforward process. As soon as you are involving other people in any way, it gets tricky, and even more so when it comes to children. I can't begin to imagine how complicated it is if you're doing medical trials, but in the case of *Free-for-All*, and for documenting such a thing, quite a few things have to be put in place to receive approval: clear signage at the entrance that informs people they may be filmed or photographed, though that also states that they have the right to tell a member of staff if they do not wish to be documented; asking for verbal permission from parents or guardians if any children are present (this is somewhat preferable to signed consent forms as then you are not taking and holding people's personal data which comes with its own problems); having a data storage plan that ensures images are stored on encrypted drives, though ironically, you still have to do this if you are then intending to make the images public; and lastly, as gaining consent from what are vaguely termed "vulnerable people" can be very difficult, unfortunately, the easier option is to decide to exclude them from being documented whatsoever. Even with all that, and then being granted ethical approval, part of me still wonders about the rights and wrongs of it all.

Yes, you may have done what you needed to do to ensure that you are meeting accepted ethical and professional standards when it comes to taking images of people for public distribution (though it is quite surprising how rarely larger institutions do this properly), but could there be a larger moral question to consider? Maybe it's because I was also predominately having to fulfil the role of photographer to attempt to document *Free-for-All*, but I find the physical act of holding a camera up, taking photographs of people somewhat unaware of the image I'm taking in that moment, an uncomfortable thing to do. This may be a little too simplistic, but I just don't like doing it and it feels sort of wrong. It's not as bad if people are posing for a photo, facing the camera - but these shots are not really what you want in terms of documenting a participatory artwork. It is this ulterior motive, this desire to attain an image for the purpose of dissemination, to evidence, albeit in a very limited fashion, the artwork. I think it's this very reason why I did a pretty bad job of documenting *Free-for-All* - yet weirdly, I feel quite good about that.



COLLECTIONS & COMMUNITY CENTRES

Gallery 3 featured a series of large photographs, covering the full size of the walls, taken of the four pop-up exhibitions that had been staged at a selection of local community centres and Rochdale Leisure Centre in the lead up to *Free-for-All*. Seen as a chance to introduce the project, talk to various communities about how they might like to get involved, and to continue building on relationships (Deeplish Community Centre, for example, was instrumental in Jasleen Kaur's 2021 exhibition *Gut Feelings Meri Jaan*), these exhibitions featured works from the Touchstone's fine art, museum and local studies collections which were brought outside of the institution for display.

This, in part, stemmed from the previous project *But what if we tried?* I worked on with Touchstones in 2019. For this, I had challenged the gallery to display as much of their 1,500+ collection of artworks in a single exhibition as possible. Initially made in response to the recurring complaint made by visitors that not enough of the collection was on display (a common complaint for most municipal galleries), however, what the project really became about was public ownership and the fragility of municipal art galleries after years of cuts from central Government. At a time when a few councils around the country have begun to sell off the more valuable works from their collections, this demonstration of the Borough of Rochdale's collection took on a particular significance. Though we managed to get about a third of the overall collection into the gallery (fitting everything in would be genuinely impossible), one unrealised plan that had emerged during that process was the idea to disperse the collection throughout the borough. In the years that followed the Touchstone's team had kept working on the idea and developed popular initiatives such as driving Lowry paintings to different places in Rochdale in a white transit van. By the time of *Free-for-All*, all the complications and logistics had already been solved so it felt fitting to introduce the project in this way: these items in the collection are yours; the gallery itself is yours too.

Bringing the collection out of the gallery is a great way to get people to engage with it, and is a positive use of it as an asset, but through the experience of working with the collection, one thing has really stood out for me – as a publicly owned asset, the collection is the main protection municipal art galleries have. Put directly, because a municipality has a publicly owned art collection, the council is then duty bound to preserve and make it publicly available. In order to do that you need an art gallery; without the collection, removing the gallery is much easier to do.

As a younger artist, I must admit, it used to frustrate me that so many municipal art galleries gave such space to their collections – the opposite complaint to those that informed *But what if we tried?* (see here, how hard it is for galleries to please everyone). I found the wider public preference for these old, dated artworks over the work of contemporary artists who, you know, are actually alive, somewhat depressing. Old Victorian collections are hugely problematic: overwhelmingly produced (and collected) by privileged white men, in which the content of many of the works we now easily see as sexist, racist, occasionally paedophilic, or at best, obfuscate the histories of the people who now collectively own them. That is not to say they aren't of artistic or historical worth, or that our personal appreciation and attachments to them aren't valid. Particular artworks you grow up regularly seeing in your local gallery can gain massive personal significance, for instance. But the point is – there are a lot of good arguments for why we shouldn't give our public collections such reverence. The dilemma at hand, however, is that it is these very collections that safeguard the existence of municipal galleries. How we as artists, as galleries, and as visitors, reconcile with this will become growingly important. Touchstones, to their credit, I think were quite smart in inviting artists, as they did with me, to produce new artworks and exhibitions in response to their collection. But I'm not sure you can keep doing that forever.

Likewise, and also to their credit, Rochdale has done an amazing job of preserving libraries, community centres and other public services – many of the things that have slowly been disappearing under the guise of austerity elsewhere in the country. Unfortunately, libraries, community centres, leisure centres, youth centres, schools, and many of the other facilities that help sustain our societies don't have hugely valuable collections that are protected by the need for museum accreditation. If it were possible, I like the idea that our collections get divided up and shared between all these spaces on a permanent basis – a true form of shared ownership. For now though, just bringing them round seems like a good place to start.



SHARED SPACE

At the end of the 19th century, the artist's studio was a place of work and life. The artist lived and worked in the same space, and the studio was a place of social interaction. The artist's studio was a place of work and life. The artist lived and worked in the same space, and the studio was a place of social interaction. The artist's studio was a place of work and life. The artist lived and worked in the same space, and the studio was a place of social interaction.

FRI 12 AM
FROM THE COLLECTION
A SPECIAL PLEASER
L. BERTINI BARBER
OUT IN THE COLD
JOHN SERGEANT WARRIE

DOG DAY AFTERNOON

In some of the early meetings with the team at Touchstones about *Free-for-All* it felt important to stress that the project was also a chance for them, equally as members of the borough, to contribute ideas towards the programme or use the gallery in their own way. This led to great things such as the Marketing Executive running a series of film screenings or another doing their own pop-up exhibition; but what threw me the most was when a member of the team flipped it on me and asked what I would want to do.

Part of the concept of *Free-for-All*, in my head at least, was the purposeful vacating of the space from my own “artworks” to make room for and enable contributions from any member of the public. Putting aside how inherently contradictory that is, given the whole thing is my “artwork”, it hadn’t really crossed my mind that I might also take advantage of *Free-for-All* to do something I really wanted to do as well. At first I was uneasy with the idea of putting something directly into the programme myself, given the whole thing is already me doing something I really wanted to do, but what dawned on me in that moment was that I could potentially implement something I wish more galleries would do: become dog-friendly.

If you have a dog – like I, and over a third of households in the UK do – going places is quite complicated. One of the main places you can’t take dogs (in the UK at least) is to art galleries and museums. There are exceptions, and we will get onto them shortly, but generally if you have a dog, making a day trip to visit an exhibition (or *exhibitions* if you’re keen like me) isn’t straightforward, and personally, I see far less art now than I used to before having a dog. The strategy I usually have to take is that my wife and I take it in turns going inside the gallery whilst the other waits outside with our dog, somewhat taking the enjoyment out of visiting an exhibition together (something through which our relationship was formed). It only clicked recently that, as a child who grew up in a house full of dogs and no car, this was the real reason I don’t think I ever went to a gallery or museum (or really anywhere) with both of my parents at the same time. I say this not for any sense of pity, as there are far worse circumstances, but more as a realisation that dog-ownership is potentially a larger factor on visitor figures than many in the sector may realise.

In 2019 and into early 2020 I was part of a residency and exhibition shared between Venture Arts and Castlefield Gallery in Manchester. Venture Arts is an organisation that provide amazing workshops and support for artists with learning disabilities and Castlefield Gallery is a super supportive contemporary art gallery I had always wanted to have the honour to work with. The invitation was to be part of a group show with two artists chosen by Castlefield (my chance had finally come!) and two artists chosen by Venture Arts, where in the months leading up to it we would all share a studio space to work on the exhibition collaboratively. As issues of accessibility and outmoded notions of “outsider art” have been, and still unfortunately are, barriers for many artists with learning disabilities to have a place within the artworld, these concerns naturally started to inform the resulting exhibition. Though not explicitly centred around accessibility in relation to learning disabilities (as, understandably, many learning disabled artists and organisations don’t always want to always be placed in that context) it more became about how to make the gallery generally more welcoming. As the project was predominantly funded by Salford University, they encouraged linking artists with their various researchers and academics. We met with environmental psychologists, botanists, thermal specialists, and much of these conversations informed transforming the gallery in subtle ways to make it more welcoming, as well as more environmentally sustainable. It would be deserving of its own longer text, as there was loads to learn from it, but in short (on my part), one of things I did was to install infrared heating in the gallery and made a wall-mounted photographic work that emitted infrared heat to those standing in front of it (Castlefield Gallery, like many other galleries, is really, really cold – specially in February when this show was on). Another thing I tried to do was to make the gallery dog-friendly but the gallery team were having none of it.

I love Castlefield Gallery, and I continue to be a massive supporter of them, but bloody hell trying to convince them to let dogs in the gallery, even for a day, or an afternoon, or an hour, was just flat out impossible. Potential damage to works, cultural sensitivity, allergies, insurance, they would give as reasons as to why it just couldn’t be done. They would not budge. I got a bit carried away and started thinking about overwhelming them with assistance dogs (which to be fair, many people who train assistance dogs are always keen to find quiet indoor spaces for which galleries are a great solution) but eventually I just had to accept that it wasn’t going to happen. In the Venture Arts studio, I had been making ceramic dog bowls in the hope they could be used for the visiting dogs but had to settle with displaying the original terracotta prototype version just titled *Sorry*. To Castlefield’s credit, they did acknowledge in the exhibition text that I had at least attempted to make them change their anti-dog policy, albeit unsuccessfully.

Whilst this exhibition was on I had an interview for a residency at Newlyn Art Gallery and The Exchange, Penzance. After the long train journey down there, and after doing the interview, I walked along the seafront to Newlyn Art Gallery to see their current show. I entered the gallery only to witness another visitor in there with a dog – a sign!

By summer 2021 I was undertaking the (somewhat delayed) residency and had time to talk with various members of staff, volunteers and visitors about the impact being dog friendly has on the gallery. I had actually been in the middle of making a pilot version of a film in which these audio interviews were edited to interactions between my dog and their dogs inside the gallery as if they were talking to each other (imagine *Homeward Bound* but as a documentary). However, during the tedious process of editing it all together I learnt that in the then recently opened *British Art Show* Patrick Goddard's new video work *Animal Antics* (2021) featured a talking dog which somewhat discouraged me from finishing it. That, and Newlyn's next few exhibitions were in conjunction with the Arts Council Collection and Arts Council England apparently have a no dogs policy so it maybe wasn't the best time to release a film about how dog-friendly the gallery normally is.

In hindsight, I should have just finished the dog film and not worried about it as what was discussed in those conversations has of a lot of value in trying to make the case for more galleries to become dog-friendly. Firstly, in decades of them letting dogs into the gallery, there had not been a single instance of work being damaged, and as far as anyone seemed to know there had not been any urination, defecation, or someone having an allergic reaction. A repeated point, in fact, was that children cause far more issues and banning them might be more preferable to dogs. That members of staff could bring their dogs into work with them, if necessary, was seen as a big positive of working there, and loads of people visited the gallery with their dogs solely because they heard it was dog-friendly. One thing that helps is that *Visit Cornwall*, the local tourist board, apparently has being dog-friendly as one of their top priorities and really encourage it. But more than all of that, what you will observe if you're in the gallery and someone comes in with a dog – separate visitors begin speaking to one another. Nothing is a better conversation starter than a dog being present, as I'm sure many dog walkers will attest to, but in a gallery context in which the norm is an awkward silence between visitors who almost never interact with one another, once someone comes in with a dog, people start talking. It is a transformative act and does wonders for the visitor experience. You have to witness it first hand to really appreciate the positive impact it has, and so when I had to think about what I might do for *Free-for-All*, I knew this was my chance.

Thankfully Touchstones were quite receptive to the idea, but it still required a degree of negotiation. The solution we arrived at was to have a series of promoted 'dog days' every other Friday that would run throughout the seven weeks of *Free-for-All*. By having advertised dates for when dogs could come to the gallery, people who would not want to risk potentially being in the gallery at the same time as a dog could know to avoid it. Initially I suggested we could just try 'dog day afternoons' but as the gallery only opens at 10, everyone seemed happy for it just to be the full day instead. For some unknown reason – possibly an event was being planned for a Friday which dogs might have complicated but didn't end up happening – the dates of the dog days got juggled around a bit; which frustratingly meant we missed having what would have originally been a dog day on *International Dog Day*. A missed marketing opportunity and good reminder to always keep the list of 'international whatever day' to hand.

In terms of the day, Friday's had been considered preferable as this would coincide with Jumuh (Friday prayer) and, in theory, mean a lower chance of Muslim visitors who may feel uncomfortable with the presence of dogs in the gallery. The rights and wrongs of dog ownership, interaction, or presence within Islam is varied, complex, culturally specific and good not to make presumptions about. Greater sensitivity and consultation are needed when making any decisions in relation to religion, and certainly not just used as a convenient excuse. During the few times I've discussed becoming dog-friendly with other galleries, Muslim inclusivity is often used as the main excuse against it. Though funnily enough, if you try to encourage galleries not to have alcohol at their openings – as I have done a few times for exhibitions I've been in (though always unsuccessfully) – pointing out that another benefit is that it is more inclusive for Muslim communities doesn't make them change their mind.

However, it is of course important to acknowledge that for many people, whether for religious or cultural reasons, or negative personal experiences, they find it difficult to be around dogs – I feel that's why the compromise of having certain days when dogs are, or are not, allowed in the gallery is totally fair. Equally, there are many people, as we learnt from some of those who visited during the dog days, who don't (even can't) go anywhere without their dog. Being able to welcome them to the gallery, some for the first time ever, made the act feel far more inclusive than exclusionary. The dog days were so positive, joyous, and made the gallery feel alive in a way that is otherwise quite hard to achieve. I believe dogs do far more good than any perceived bad.

There are other arguments against dogs around insurance policies, the value of the artwork, allergies and even conservation issues. Firstly, I've been in loads of blue chip commercial galleries and seen collectors with their dogs around insanely expensive artworks (even off lead on one occasion), and whenever I've asked to see these apparent insurance policies, no one can ever seem to find them. If they really do exist, I doubt adding 'dog-friendly gallery coverage' would really cost that much? Collectors don't ban dogs from their homes. And in terms of allergies that could harm people, or mites / fleas that could supposedly harm artworks – the amount of dog hair I have on myself at any given time, even without my dog present, would surely be doing just as much damage.

I'm conscious this text is heavily biased, and in the wider conversation of art gallery inclusivity, focussing on dogs when other humans have been so historically alienated or marginalised from these spaces may come across as dismissive – but the point is, which I do hope comes across – it isn't about letting dogs in, but about letting the millions of people with dogs, in. Dogs, I'm fairly confident, find little interest in art, but it just seems that as such a simple thing galleries could do to be more welcoming and inclusive, why can't they just do it?

I feel like I'm gearing up to launch a national dog-friendly art gallery campaign – I'm already imagining a website that lists all the public galleries that are dog friendly and all the galleries that are not. I've not properly started ringing round yet, but so far I only have Newlyn Art Gallery & The Exchange and Humber Street Gallery in Hull on the dog-friendly list. Southwark Park Galleries did an excellent exhibition in 2019 called *Dog Show*, curated by dogs, and were dog-friendly during the show but it is unclear if they still are. The jury is still out on whether Touchstones will become more dog-friendly or not, but in the meantime I am planning to submit Dog Days as an artwork to various open call exhibitions. The hope being that even organising a single dog day might serve as an example of how positive it can be. So far I submitted it to Leeds Art Gallery's 'Leeds Artists Show' but like many artists who submit to their local municipal gallery open exhibition – was disappointed to not be selected.



ART GALLERIES ARE NOT FRAGILE



Something that is maybe already obvious to many other people, but took me a while (and from doing a project like *Free-for-All*) to come to the realisation of – is that art galleries, in and of themselves, are incredibly robust spaces.

Maybe because, whether we attended them as children or not, we have been made to feel like you have to move around a gallery carefully whilst avoiding everything. Yes, we avoid the artworks, but also the walls, and for some (if you're lucky to be in a gallery that provides places to sit) even sitting down doesn't feel as comfortable as it usually should. In many people's mind, art is something that is fragile, not to be touched, not to get close to, and to be looked at whilst on your best behaviour. Once you take the "art" out, however, what you're left with is a pretty tough room.

Between every exhibition, once the works are taken down, the various screw holes are filled, sanded and painted, whole walls are re-painted, and often, temporary walls are taken down, moved, or built anew. During the installation period, things get dusty, crates get moved in and out, stuff get piled up or leant against walls, paint spilled on the floor. Not always, but usually... it's a mess. Some installations, when you finally take them down, have totally knackered the gallery space. But with the skill and effort of technicians, all is *made right* again – over and over. This is not something the public sees. Once the works are in place, and the walls pristine, you'd be forgiven for feeling like the whole place is fragile. But it's not.

Here, I think we need to blame artists a little bit – let's stop making artworks that are so fragile. The main reason, whether they choose to admit it or not (or realise it or not) is that making artworks into more precious objects makes them more suitable for commercial sale. Generally, the more vulnerable the better.

Once upon a time, people put their drawings, photographs or watercolours inside frames in order to protect the work and make them easier to handle. Older framed works always look battered, not because people knowingly mishandled them, but because the frame wasn't the important part of the work. You could, after all, just re-frame it. Nowadays, frames are hung by technicians wearing white gloves and carefully dusted – with not a single scratch or mark on them. A high quality frame can often be the thing that can help add value to an otherwise un-precious work (though I do admit, I do love a really nice frame).

Artists made sculptures out of bronze so you could stick them outside and they would last for hundreds of years – yet when you put them inside, away from the elements, the slightest fingerprint needs to be buffed out immediately. We make most crockery, the things we handle and use the most in our homes, out of ceramic or earthenware – but if you put it on a plinth, people are terrified to go near it. In the age of digital photography, it would usually just be cheaper to re-print an image locally each time it is shown, instead of carefully packing it and having it shipped by art handlers. The irony being, most artworks – paintings being the main exception – are more often than not produced and/or sold as multiple editions anyway. We are still hooked on the idea of the rarity and precarity of the art object, but it doesn't really align with reality. Do you know how most artists treat their own works? They are usually shoved in a loft with a bit of bubble wrap on.

To cut artists some slack, it is more the commercial gallery system – the market – that keeps turning whatever they do into precious objects. You could make the most indestructible object in human history and it would still get wrapped in acid-free tissue paper, bubble wrap, put in a plywood crate, moved by specially insured handlers in a temperature controlled vehicle and condition checked at multiple points during that process. The ritual, and the cost of that ritual, are all part of the process of justifying the inflated value of art objects.

Art galleries, at least purpose built ones, are specifically designed to be able to be transformed, have all sorts of things built, fixed, screwed, splattered, and then made good-as-new on a routine basis. They generally have really good access – not because the people that designed the buildings years ago cared about wheelchair access – you just need big doors and lifts to move larger artworks in and out. If you shift the precious art objects out the way, think about art being something else entirely – then gallery spaces are incredibly suited for almost anything. The more we might challenge the common uses of these spaces, the more we might shift wider perspectives about what constitutes art making, and in turn, hopefully stop visitors feeling nervous every time they enter the building.

PUBLIC PRIVATE SPACE

A few years ago on one of my many visits to Touchstones, it happened to be on a Monday or Tuesday when the gallery was closed. I was down at the reception, I think trying to work out how to use the cctv cameras to make time-lapse videos, when a string of men kept ringing the doorbell, being let in by the front of house staff, and then making their way through to one of the larger private spaces. Not being aware of what was going on, it wasn't until a very lively trans woman arrived and asked “where's the party?” that I couldn't help but ask “what party?”.

It turned out this was one of the monthly *Asian LGTB* meet-ups that had been quietly taking place at Touchstones for a few years. Precisely because art galleries have traditionally been white, middle-class spaces, the gallery could provide a degree of cover for members of the large South Asian community in Rochdale who chose to keep their sexuality a secret, yet still wished to have somewhere to come together as a community. This is a really excellent use of an art gallery.

Since then, the Asian LGTB group has grown bigger and become more publicly visible, and it was with great honour that we were able to host their larger Pride event as part of *Free-for-All* (though I'm sure it would have happened regardless). Being able to have the whole building to yourself, staff to control who can and can't enter, in the very centre of town – and for free – is not insignificant.

In a similar manner, we were able to host a celebration day for Cared for Children and their foster families. As some children in the care and foster system either have to have their identities or whereabouts kept closely guarded, having a large, fun event where this was much less of a worry is a meaningful gesture. Or if not individually the case, just having a special event unique to them is a nice thing to do. I only dipped in and out of both events, as it's nice just to let people get on with things, but both groups clearly had a really fun, and quite raucous time – not something, it must be said, that happens very often inside art galleries.

Both events built upon links the gallery has established over the years but I feel both served to illustrate the importance of just being able to provide large, private space. If anything, this was an aspect of *Free-for-All* that was both under-utilised and under-promoted. The difficulty is that more and more public spaces are tasked with having to generate revenue from the hiring out of their spaces, in order to make up for the shortfall in funding, essentially privatising them. It is common practice that certain rooms or spaces are hired out for corporate meetings, events, conferences, or whatever, and so if you turn around and just say “anyone can use these spaces for free”, you might be undermining various council business plans. The adverse effect of this, which should be obvious, is that it becomes harder and harder for people to organise, celebrate, or otherwise enrich their communities unless they have the money to hire the space. Community centres, church halls, some schools even, do provide this as a service on a local level – but most centralised spaces have become limited to corporate use. And here we are talking about being inside; when it comes to being outside, the ongoing rise of privately owned public spaces (known as POPS) are similarly stifling any sort of organic local activity from taking place.

Returning back to *Free-for-All* as an example – yes, having really good community engagement and local exhibitions in your smaller side spaces is a good thing, but this is always somewhat derided by being secondary. Sometimes you have to put it first to show you really care.

Most of the people who came forward with ideas and suggestions of what they wanted to do or contribute to *Free-for-All*, were all really selfless. Putting on workshops or performances for others to freely attend, wanting to arrange meet-ups, wanting to make collaborative artworks with the public... I kept waiting for someone just to ask do to something privately. I think a CrossFit class used one of the spaces one day; that was about as exclusive as anything got. Maybe it is something that should have been stated as a clearer offer, but it more felt like people just wanted to respond to the generosity *Free-for-All* itself attempted to embody. Next time, maybe I'll just put up a sign-up sheet for first-come-first-serve exclusive use of the spaces when the gallery is closed to the public. These spaces after all, belong to them.





MAKING ARTISTS

The role of the municipal gallery in forming young people into artists really can't be understated. For most young people, the local art gallery is maybe somewhere they visit on a school trip, or maybe they get brought there on a wet weekend whilst their parent(s) or guardian(s) are looking for something free to do. This is most people's general experience of art (at least firsthand) and for a lot of these young people, this experience seems to be slightly bewildering or – which is probably fair to say – visibly boring. For a small number, however, this experience clearly embeds something, or connects with them in a way that influences them towards pursuing art. The gallery provides a physical frame of reference for the young mind to understand, at the very least, what art is and where it goes.

The act of drawing, for instance, shifts from the exercise of visualising your imagination for its own sake, to making one of these things that has the potential to exist within a gallery. You learn there are these people called artists, who not only make these things for a living, but are seen as some of the most important people in human history. It is easy to see how in the young mind that might be projecting its future role, especially if they like drawing and painting, the idea of “I really want to be an artist when I grow up” is really appealing. Children aspire to be the things they are both aware of, and understand the role of – vets, police, teachers, footballers, actors, musicians etc. It is not until a young person has gone to an art gallery that it becomes tangible what an artist really is, and that they could become one.

It is much more complicated than that, of course; every artist has their own unique path that led them to that position, but (I'm generalising here) in the context of the UK at least, the majority of artists (or people who might not consider themselves artists but who make art) likely went to their local art gallery when they were young – and it was significant to them. If we consider that roughly a quarter of a million people apply to art & design degree courses each year, this is a relatively successful hit rate. Why then, should we really be questioning what art galleries are doing? For me, the issue is less about how many artists we're making (though of course the more the merrier) but more about what type of artist; and not necessarily who we are appealing to, but who are we not appealing to. To make any significant long-term change to inclusion in the arts, I firmly believe we have to start at the earliest point – and that is the municipal art gallery.

When I was younger I used to love to draw. Children who are good at drawing (and sometimes not so good at other subjects) are encouraged towards art classes in school. They are then more likely to be brought on a school trip to a gallery, or to be exposed to examples of different artworks (albeit ones on the National Curriculum's approved artist list (don't get me started!)). More often than not though, these examples of artworks – whether in school or in the gallery – are paintings or drawings (paintings, in the young mind, essentially being fancy versions of drawings). Most schools prioritise drawing in art classes, which I'm sure is as much a pragmatic choice than anything else; pencils and paper are very affordable materials after all. The big problem with this is: if you, as a child, are not interested in, or particularly good at drawing, the education system then discourages you from thinking you could become an artist. Throughout my adult life, whenever I have had to explain to someone – outside of my immediate art world context – that I am an artist, the number one response I hear is “I was never any good at drawing”. My mere presence as someone who goes around calling themselves an artist, commonly reminds people that they were deemed unworthy because they weren't practiced enough at representational drawing when they were a child. This upsets me, as I'm sure it did them, and I don't even draw...

This problem gets even worse if you consider how many children have either physical or learning disabilities that effect their motor function, or who just aren't encouraged or introduced to drawing as a pastime. We are systemically excluding people from considering the possibility of them being an artist purely based on their drawing ability – something which, as someone who has (somewhat reluctantly) taught people how to technically draw better, I can confidently say is just a set of skills that pretty much anyone can be taught. How you draw should always be secondary to what it is you are drawing, and maybe *why* you are drawing should always be more important than that. All this is to say – art is about much more than how well you can draw.

I don't want to put full responsibility on the municipal gallery, and by association the artists who feature within them; as stated already, education plays a colossal role in this issue, and social media is flooded with surprisingly popular videos demonstrating how realistically various people can draw. But as this is the one part of the system we can potentially do something about, and by changing the type of art that young people see in the gallery, at the very least, we might make more young people think “I'm not so good at drawing, but I want to do *that!*” (whatever *that* may be).

There is of course a massive paradox here when we consider the role the collections of municipal galleries can play and what they continue to re-affirm about what art is – which for the most part is representational image

making by white men. Personally, I'm not sure how to fully reconcile this, though like with many things, it is probably about maintaining a healthy balance.

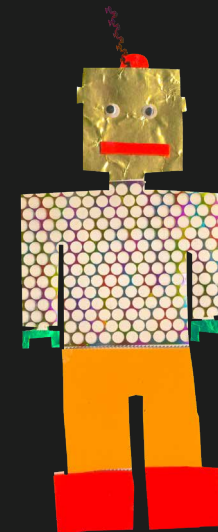
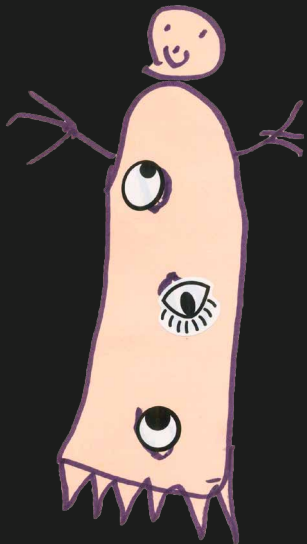
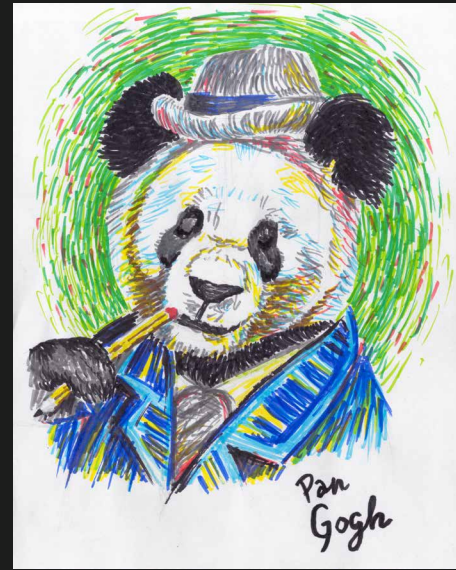
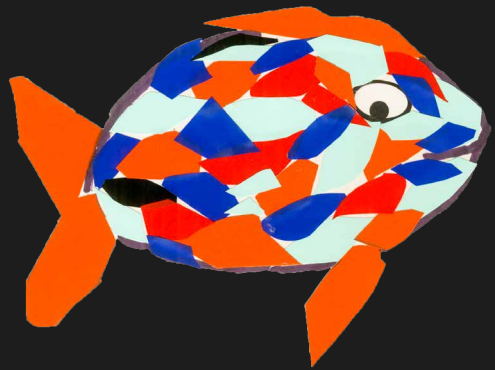
With *Free-for-All*, part of me wanted to skew the exhibition as much as possible away from traditional art making – a loose attempt to (in theory) start making different sort of artists. I understood the desire for the *We Want Your Art* open show, and upon reflection, am very glad we included it. It still could have been even more open with much less onus on flat, more conventional artworks than can go on the wall (though still equally valid forms of art making). I understood the necessity of having openly available art materials (including pencils and paper), and having an area in the gallery where anyone could put their drawing up – many of which were totally wonderful. I also understood the importance of allowing people to run life drawing classes, ceramics workshops, a pop-up darkroom, poetry readings, theatre performances, choir rehearsals, film screenings and all sorts of other activities that we more conventionally understand under the framework of 'the arts' – all of which were excellent. What I really wanted though, was stuff that wasn't obviously "arty"; something *Free-for-All* failed to attract.

Many people spoke to me, or other members of the Touchstones team, about ideas for what they might do in the gallery – street golf (it's a thing), Warhammer battles, rollerskating, Ludo competitions, remote control car racing, something about growing loads of plants, someone said they had always wanted to drive a motorbike around a gallery... I sort of lost track. In almost every case, unfortunately, none of this ever materialised. Maybe the experience or motivation, when it came to it, wasn't quite there? Maybe because these other types of more "non-art" activities already have some of their own places and contexts, that doing it in the gallery, whilst novel, was just unnecessary additional work? Maybe people just worried they might feel a bit silly, or that they were just being performative, doing something "non-art" in an "art" context? I couldn't really tell you conclusively, but I can tell you that for whatever reason, my dream that someone might just use the gallery to temporarily store a bunch of boxes, or host a bingo game, or throw mud everywhere, or set up a food bank, or do something subversive to the project itself – nothing like that really happened. Everyone just had a really great time doing loads of really creative, positive stuff. This is by no means a complaint, but I believe this was the main failing of the project. I wish more young people (and older people) who had come to *Free-for-All* had been presented with things that didn't obviously make sense to be there. It would have been nice to have a much more expanded notion of cultural activity, and in turn, what might be seen as valuable in the context of an art gallery. Still, it was important not to force or overly influence the outcomes of *Free-for-All*; though more could definitely have been done to delineate just how wide the parameters of it really could have been.

At the celebration event, on the last weekend of *Free-for-All*, it was telling that so many conversations I had involved people saying "I really wanted to...(insert wild idea)" to which I would say "You totally should have done!" and them then saying "Oh, I didn't realise I could have actually done that." The three lines I wrote that we promoted *Free-for-All* with: *WHAT WOULD YOU DO?*, *DO WHAT YOU WANT* and *YOU WOULD DO WHAT?!* should have maybe been more explicit and said instead:

PLEASE USE THIS OPPORTUNITY TO LITERALLY DO WHATEVER YOU WANT IN THIS MASSIVE GALLERY, FREE OF CHANGE, FOR YOU OR FOR EVERYONE. IT CAN BE ART RELATED OR NOT, HONESTLY ANYTHING, TAKE IT OVER, GO WILD, TAKE A CHANCE. WE WILL HELP YOU. THIS IS NOT JUST ABOUT YOU BUT ABOUT MAKING A STATEMENT ABOUT PUBLIC SPACE AND PUBLIC OWNERSHIP AND THE IMPORTANCE FREE ACCESS TO SPACE CAN HAVE ON SOCIETY. IT IS ALSO ABOUT RE-DEFINING ART MAKING FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS SO PEOPLE WHO MIGHT NOT THINK THEY ARE GOOD AT DRAWING ARE REASSURED THAT THEY ALSO HAVE A PLACE IN THE GALLERY (WHICH PARADOXICALLY, IN FACT, QUITE RARELY HAS ANY TECHNICALLY GOOD DRAWING IN IT, AND THAT IS NOT TO SAY THAT TECHNICALLY GOOD DRAWING, ITSELF, HAS ANYTHING WRONG WITH IT).

Maybe next time!



SOMBRE CELEBRATION

The Queen died on the afternoon of 8th September 2022; *Free-for-All's Celebration Event*, marking the end of the whole project, was set to take place on its penultimate day the 10th September. Let's just say the 9th September was a very complex day...

I can appreciate that for many people the death of Queen Elizabeth was upsetting, and at the same can also appreciate that for many people the outpouring of emotion for the Queen's passing was disconcerting in a very different way – the legacy of the monarchy in the UK is a contentious thing after all. The immediate issue we had to face, however, was that as public institutions in the UK were expected to enter a period of ten days national mourning and with almost all public events already being cancelled – what would we do? No one fully knew what the actual rules were, and we had to decide whether to follow suit and cancel the “Celebration Event” (probably the worst thing it could have been called) or go ahead with it. It felt like it would be a real shame for *Free-for-All* not to have its moment to bring everyone back together at the end or for all the people who had been planning performances especially for it to not have their chance. Maybe there was a way?

I wasn't personally privy to the conversations with the council, but there seemed to be an agreement, in the end, that if the event was toned down a bit, done respectfully, and sombre in nature – then it could still go ahead. Have you ever had to phone up a person doing a “bubble show” and ask if it can be done in a sombre manner? The bizarrry of this situation was not lost on me; though luckily, we could still go ahead. The next issue was that all public institutions were expected to be on a social media black out and so only posts commemorating the Queen or to announce cancelled events were allowed. We couldn't publicly say or reassure people that the celebration event was still going ahead, we just had to hope that because we hadn't said it was cancelled, that people might think it was still on. Under these circumstances, it was nice that we still had a pretty decent turnout.

In reality, the event wasn't particularly sombre – you can't really tell the young girl who had prepared a DJ set during a previous weeks DJ workshop to change her track list, bubbles are still bubbles, people want to compliment and congratulate each other for their respective contributions, and arguably, there was a sense of pride in what (to some) felt like a defiance against national pressure to be miserable. At the same time, it is worth noting that the Nigeria Community Association did do a more formal tribute to the Queen prior to their performance which went on to close the day's programme. The Nigeria Community Association had become a big part of *Free-for-All*, by far the biggest contributor – and with their final act leading a collective procession out of the gallery space together – it was a fitting end to *Free-for-All*. It was a really beautiful day, and was possibly the only public event of that kind happening in the whole country. For reassurance – if you're worrying – it turned out that in the official guidance about the ten days of national mourning, no one was supposed to cancel any events. Whilst worrying that we were the only ones possibly breaking the rules, we turned out to be some of the few who (unwittingly) followed them.

This sort of scenario is not super common, but it was a reminder to weigh up the real meaning of a project like *Free-for-All*. If you're saying you want to put people first, to invert hierarchies, to allow cultural and creative freedom, then you have to stick to your word. As much as I would have loved for the final celebration to have been packed full of people and unhindered by social responsibility to not visibly be having too much fun, I prefer how it ended. The important thing though, is that it doesn't end.

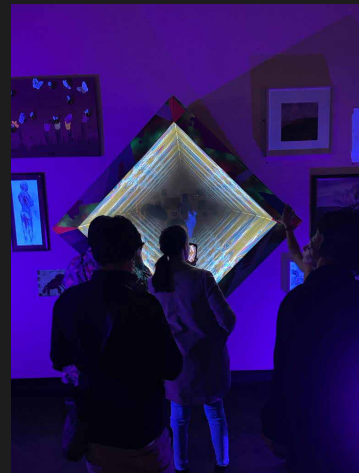
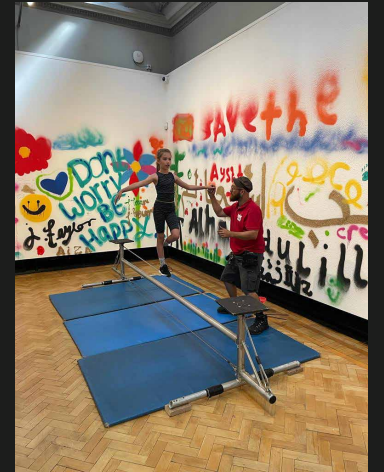
Thankfully Touchstones are keen for *Free-for-All* to become a recurring part of their programme. In the introductory exhibition text itself, they had already committed to saying this would be the first of more *Free-for-All's* to come, and that this first iteration was an experimental learning experience – and that, it certainly was. For any sort of long-term public relationship building you need routine and sustained engagement. This first *Free-for-All* was great, but what could start to happen, and what transformative qualities could it achieve if there was one every year is an exciting prospect. Within its seven weeks, there was a noticeable snowball effect – imagine after seven years.

For me, I'm incredibly fortunate to have been invited back to work with a gallery whom I had already intensively worked with, understood, and if anything, feel a part of. One of the saddest parts of being an artist (rejections, criticisms, financial precarity, and ideological woes aside) is that in most instances you only ever work with certain people, or certain galleries once. In the process of making an exhibition, or developing a big project, you all work together to make it happen; often with limited resources, stressful deadlines, unforeseen problems, and more often than not – in my experience

at least – you form meaningful friendships. But the itinerant nature of an artists work sometimes means you might never see that person again, or at least, not work with them again. The reason for this is that galleries have to be careful about working too much with a particular artist (and that is sometimes considered as anything more than once), as understandably, they need to make room for all the other artists. There will always be way more artists than there are galleries and exhibitions, so if you only have room for three or four exhibitions a year – there is not that much to go around.

Upon reflection, I think that – although *Free-for-All* was a clear idea that I desired to do – the fact Touchstones invited me back to propose another project pushed me to think less selfishly. The generosity of Touchstones' invitation encouraged me to be generous in my response. The generosity of *Free-for-All*, I feel, was reflected in the generosity of the numerous workshops, activities, and events that people put on for others to attend; and visitors were generous with their time – many coming back multiple times – or choosing to make their own contribution in one way or another. In the seven weeks of *Free-for-All*, well over two hundred artists (in both the broad and narrow sense) presented their work who might not have otherwise ever had the chance to. Some of those have already had their work re-exhibited in the recent *A Tall Order!* exhibition, and many others are in talks with the gallery to do more workshops, events, or contribute to the programme in other ways. Many new relationships have been formed, and with future *Free-for-All*'s, all I hope is that we can continue to build a community that is not just about getting more people who live locally to visit the gallery, but to become part of the gallery's own community – a true community centre.





TOUCHSTONES ROCHDALE: FREE-FOR-ALL An Evaluation

Free-for-All was conceived as a three-way collaboration between Touchstones Rochdale, the artist Harry Meadley, and the people of Rochdale. It set out to reimagine the role that civic gallery spaces and collections can play within their municipality and the communities they serve.

Free-for-All was an attempt to create a space 'that people can just come into and do things'. It was very much experimental and focused on the gallery taking a risk, breaking out of its routine and making itself permeable to the outside. While Touchstones regularly engages with community groups in the downstairs spaces, this was a challenge to open up the main gallery spaces for local people to programme for the first time.

As an experimental and conceptual artwork, *Free-for-All* played with the usual power dynamics between artist, gallery and the public. Here the artist was provocateur, guide, 'intermediary' and even potential 'scapegoat' if it went badly. There was a great deal of love for *Free-for-All* from partners, creatives and participants. For some this is exactly what a civic gallery should be doing. 3,685 visited the Touchstones building during the period, but only a portion engaged with *Free-for-All*.

For Touchstones, *Free-for-All* presented an opportunity to build on previous work with socially engaged artists and co-creation with communities. More specifically, during the pandemic Touchstones staff were re-deployed to front line support services and developed creative activities outside of the gallery. The role creativity played in supporting wellbeing was also highlighted in the Public Health Annual Report commissioned from Touchstones.

For those in the know, Touchstones has changed. In the past it was seen as tired, intimidating and unfriendly. In recent years that has been turned around to make it a warm, welcoming and community-focused place. But this awareness appears slow to take root in the wider community. *Free-for-All* took place against this backdrop of changing perceptions.

PROCESS & PROJECT MANAGEMENT

A staff feedback session explored the process of running and managing *Free-for-All* from within the organisation. Harry Meadley's concept for the programme was to challenge Touchstones to work in a different way and to take risks. This challenge had both positive and negative impacts.

Positive

- The team programmed a significant number of activities in a very short window of time.
- They trialled new types of activity that they wouldn't have tried otherwise.
- They developed relationships with organisations and individual artists/practitioners.
- The process encouraged them to think about different ways of doing things.
- Organisations involved in *Free-for-All* booked other activities at Touchstones almost immediately after taking part in the programme – it stimulated demand.

Negative

- Decision-making was difficult because the team were unclear where the power sat within the project. Who had the final say on the activities – the artist, the organisation or the community?
- The idea that *Free-for-All* could fail as part of the experiment sat uncomfortably with some staff who wondered how it would affect their KPIs or how they would be seen personally.
- *Free-for-All* was very stressful for the team to deliver and had a negative impact on mental health.
- To make *Free-for-All* happen everyone needed to get involved and this negatively impacted on workloads and delivering other projects.
- Responding to ideas from the community at short notice proved very difficult. What support did they need? What were the health and safety implications? What budget was needed? Could it be fitted into the programme? How could it be marketed at the last minute?
- *Free-for-All* changed people's expectations of how the building could be used and what would be programmed and these expectations had to be managed once the programme finished.

PARTICIPANTS

92% would like *Free-for-All* to happen again at Touchstones

82% agreed that *Free-for-All* contributed to their health and wellbeing

79% agreed that *Free-for-All* had lots of events and activities that appealed to them

77% visited Touchstones more often during *Free-For-All*

68% agreed that *Free-for-All* increased their feelings of belonging in Rochdale borough

Free-for-All seems to have appealed particularly to women aged 30 – 70.

Strengths

- The range of art forms and types of creativity included
- The combination with mindfulness and wellbeing
- Easy opportunities to try something new and different
- Giving space to local groups
- The focus on local talent

Weaknesses

- Short notice of activities and missing things that sounded good
- Not enough detail on some activities to know what they were
- The lack of wider publicity and awareness
- The lack of local parking
- Some disorganisation

Visitor Comments

"I loved all the variety and the humorous way it was all framed!"

"I liked the fact that the space was being used in the community by the community with so many different things to do and choose from. A great idea."

"I think these events are a necessity, especially now [post Covid]. Being able to see so many different ways of being creative and experiencing it first-hand is wonderful."

"We've got a big Asian community in Rochdale, and my Asian friends said they wouldn't have dreamed of going to Touchstones, but we all came and did our art on the wall and they loved it! And now they all come on a Saturday."

PARTNERS

• The partners were enthusiastic about *Free-for-All* and Touchstones.

• There is a lack of community assets in Rochdale, so having a central, accessible space to use for creative community activities is very valuable.

• Touchstones is often unfamiliar to members of the community and can be seen as somewhat intimidating. *Free-for-All* presented the space as friendly, safe and not elitist. Participants could also visit in their pre-existing groups in which they were comfortable.

• Touchstones is more than a community centre – the prestige of the building leads to significant pride for individuals having their work presented there.

• The summer holiday period was considered to be the perfect time of year for this kind of activity.

• Partners would like to see *Free-for-All* as a regular part of the Touchstones annual programme.

• With a longer lead-in time, they could support the development of and the promotion of activities to their constituencies better.

LEARNING TAKE-AWAYS

• *Free-for-All* did challenge the Touchstones team to take risks and work outside their comfort zones.

• Activities and events were tried that had never been tried before and some of these have been positively embraced by the organisation.

• Internally, there is a willingness to build on this experiment and take the *Free-for-All* approach forward into the annual programme. Partners, creatives and participants are also keen to see it develop.

• The 'vagueness' and lack of clear process made *Free-for-All* very difficult to manage. A rolling open programme does not make the best use of resources.

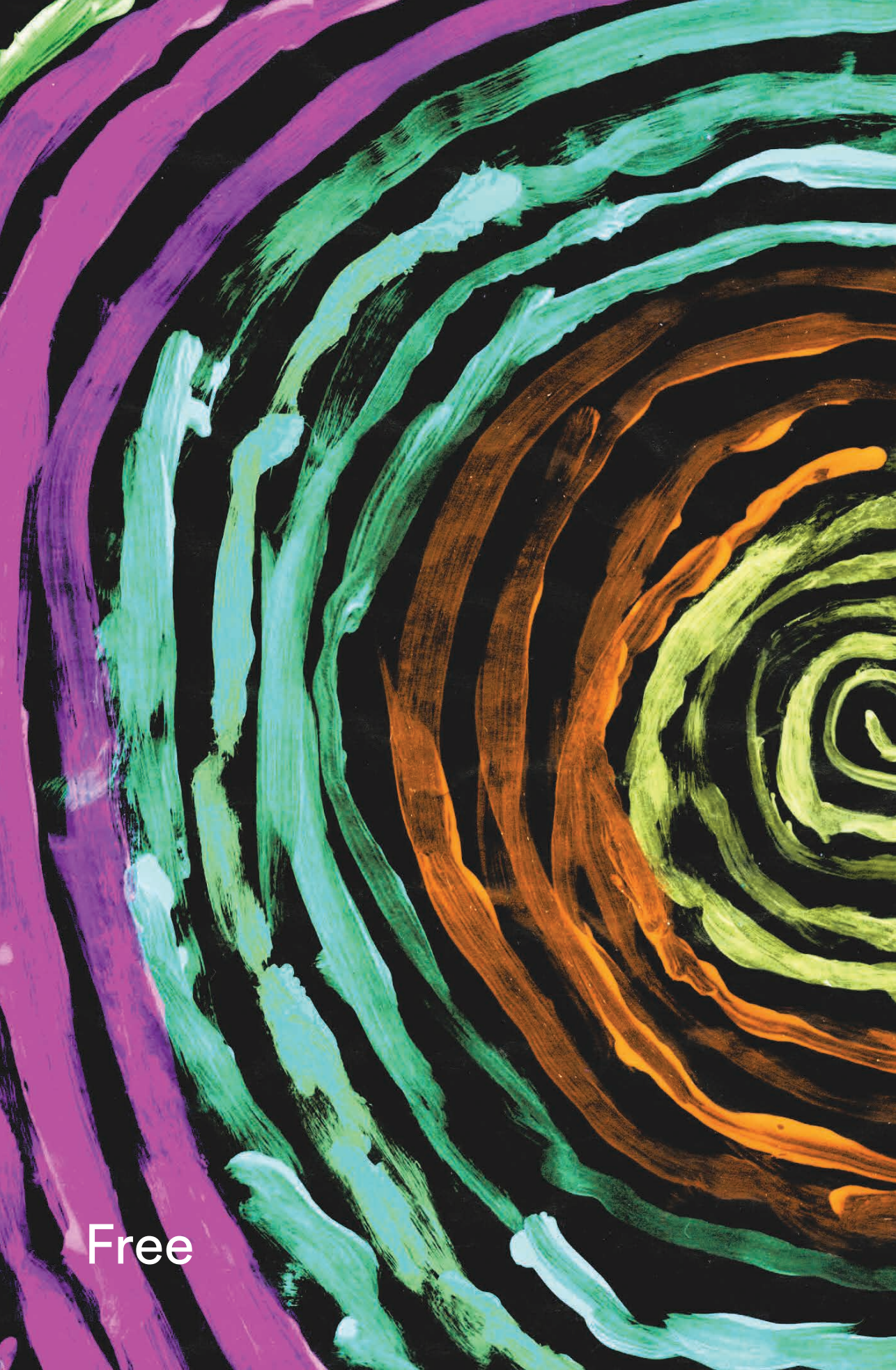
• Much longer lead-in times would help encourage and support new ideas from the community, partnership development and awareness raising.

• Perceptions of Touchstones are changing in Rochdale and *Free-for-All* helped cement the sense of inclusiveness and welcome amongst existing contacts. However, levels of engagement were relatively low and *Free-for-All* struggled to reach many new people.

• Touchstones can take the best of what a community centre can offer in terms of space and welcome and combine it with a sense of prestige and local pride to create a unique local asset.

	Outright Failure	Precarious Failure	Tolerable Failure	Conflicted Success	Resilient Success	Outright Success
Purpose - the attainment of stated aims, objectives and outcomes	Nothing is programmed by local people or Touchstones during the period and the gallery is empty.	A small number of events are programmed entirely by Touchstones – a failure to experiment or take risks.	A series of events are programmed, driven almost entirely by Touchstones but with a small number of events programmed by existing community contacts. Few risks taken.	A mixed programme emerges, combining events and activities by partners and artists and Touchstones. Those involved are mainly existing contacts. Some risks are taken.	A significant programme in which the majority of activities come from the community with a small amount of curation by Touchstones staff. Many of those involved are new to Touchstones, as are the types of activity.	Local people take complete ownership of the gallery and programme all events. Those involved are new to Touchstones. Activities are new to Touchstones. Lots of risks taken and experiments.
Process - the actions, activities and stages of delivery	All Touchstones staff refuse to engage with <i>Free-for-All</i> . There is no programme or project management. The budget is not spent.	Not all staff are on board with the concept or understand it. There is little sharing of information in the team and significant confusion. There is little in the way of process put in place.	Some staff are engaged but others are not. There is some confusion. Project management processes are quite weak.	Most staff are engaged with the programme and supportive. Project management processes are put in place but not all work well.	The vast majority of staff are actively engaged with the programme and excited about it. Most project management runs smoothly and there are processes in place for the future.	All Touchstones staff are excited about <i>Free-for-All</i> and want it to carry on. Excellent project management is in place and all events run smoothly.
Participation - levels of participation and agency	No events are programmed. People wanting to put on events are turned away.	Events are programmed but nobody participates. Staff are very controlling about the kinds of events allowed. The gallery feels very empty and quiet.	Very small numbers at events and many have to be cancelled due to lack of interest. People have some agency in suggesting events but most are suggested by Touchstones. There is little atmosphere.	Some events are well attended but some are poorly attended and some have to be cancelled. There is some buzz about the building.	Most events are well attended. There is a buzz about the building.	Events are full to capacity. Members of the community have significant agency and input into what is programmed and how. The building feels like a community hub.
Practice - impact on artistic and curatorial practice	There is no experimentation and nothing is learned either by the gallery or by the artist. No intention to run <i>Free-for-All</i> again.	Events are programmed by Touchstones but very little is new and the gallery and artist learn little about opening up the gallery to the public. No intention to run <i>Free-for-All</i> again.	Events are programmed by Touchstones and some by the public. A small amount of experimentation and little learning. No intention to run <i>Free-for-All</i> again.	Touchstones experiments with a new way to programme and learns something in the process. Intention to run <i>Free-for-All</i> again. Harry Meadley learns something from <i>Free-for-All</i> but doesn't take the ideas forward in his practice. No interest in the sector.	Touchstones experiments with a new way to programme and learns something in the process. Intention to run <i>Free-for-All</i> again. Harry Meadley develops his artistic practice in response. Some interest in the sector.	Touchstones experiments with a new way to programme and learns significantly in the process. Intention to run <i>Free-for-All</i> again. Informs other areas of gallery practice. Harry Meadley significantly develops his artistic practice in response and the ideas are taken up more widely in the sector.
Profile - the reputation and the ability to promote	<i>Free-for-All</i> achieves no coverage and awareness is non-existent.	Paid for social media achieves some reach but low engagement and no media coverage.	Some profile achieved in the sector through Harry Meadley's interview for Front Row on Radio 4 and Arts Professional article. Some online local coverage. Paid for social media advertising achieves some reach but awareness and engagement locally appear low.	<i>Free-for-All</i> achieves national coverage but this doesn't translate into local awareness or engagement. There is some social media engagement.	<i>Free-for-All</i> achieves some national, regional and local coverage. The number of social media shares and likes are high.	<i>Free-for-All</i> achieves extensive coverage nationally, regionally and locally. Awareness in the local community is high and social media shares and likes reach record numbers.

FailSpace grid outlining the differing degrees of failure or success. Green boxes indicate result following evaluation process.



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