

## Digital muse

**Drew Hemment** on how one group of artists is exploring the challenges and opportunities offered by AI

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**Syima Aslam** and **Andy Haldane**

dissect the roots and resounding impact of the Bradford Literature Festival

**Eddy Frankel** bets football could be a key to unlocking fine art for new audiences



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ARTS AND MINDS

**“In so many ways, we are just getting started...”**

**M**y title is drawn from the fabulous book of the same name, written by our resident historian Dr Anton Howes. This charts the rich and illustrious history of the RSA, in which arts and culture have always played a central part. The RSA held Britain’s first *dedicated* exhibition of contemporary art, which took place around 1760. A subsequent breakaway movement led eventually to the creation of the Royal Academy. The RSA would later spawn other cultural institutions, including the Royal College of Music and the Royal Photographic Society.

Arts and culture have been restored to their rightful place, at the centre of the RSA, through our new Design for Life mission. We can see this in the artworks now adorning RSA House, to say nothing of the music and film. Early next year, our Vaults will host the work of a charity that rehabilitates offenders through programmes in music, art and writing. And, in November, we announced a grand coalition of organisations (including the BBC, Channel 4 and ITV) bringing to life a ‘Northern Cultural Corridor’ to supercharge the growth of the creative industries in the North (as the article by Professor Jonathan Sapsed sets out).

In this, the final issue of the *Journal* for 2023, you will discover the practical experiences of a set of inspirational leaders from right around the world, as they have used arts and culture to reshape lives and communities – from football to frescos, artisans to artificial intelligence. Professor Drew Hemment’s cover feature explores the potential of human-machine partnerships, from computer-generated images to robots trained to paint artwork. The latter is demonstrated on

the cover image of this issue, courtesy of artist Sougwen Chung.

The fascinating piece by Susan Magsamen, Founder and Executive Director of the International Arts + Mind Lab, explains how our brains and bodies are revitalised by artistic and cultural experiences. Susan points to research suggesting that participating in just one art experience per month can extend a person’s life by 10 years. And what is true for individuals is true for communities, too, as the articles by Lee Baker and Eddy Frankel demonstrate and as the pieces by the RSA’s Tom Stratton and the Hooogar Collective (a young group of artists in Guadalajara, Mexico) bring to life.

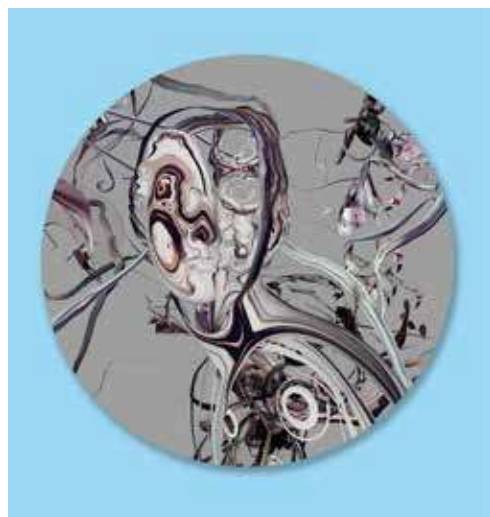
There is inspiration on every page of this issue of the *Journal*, rounding off a vibrant series of editions this year across the themes of our mission: people, place and planet. All three feature in my conversation with Syima Aslam, the self-confessed ‘insane geek’ who dreamed up and now delivers the brilliant and brilliantly multi-cultural Bradford Literature Festival. For evidence that the arts and culture really do change lives for the better, you need look no further than Syima and the success of the festival.

Thank you to everyone who has contributed to the *Journal* this year. The RSA is an institution born from the Enlightenment. Our next edition, in March 2024, will celebrate the RSA’s 270th anniversary. We may have been doing this for a long time but, in so many ways, we are just getting started. The RSA aims to be at the vanguard of a New Enlightenment, one placing arts, culture and creativity at the centre of societal success. ■

**Andy Haldane** is  
Chief Executive  
Officer at the RSA

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## We are the RSA

The Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce. Where world-leading ideas are turned into world-changing actions.

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We unite people and ideas in collective action to create opportunities to regenerate our world.

### We are

A unique global network of changemakers enabling people, places and the planet to flourish in harmony.

## RSA

# Designers from diverse disciplines join RDIs

Seven 'Royal Designers' spanning a range of disciplines have been elected and were due to be recognised at a ceremony at RSA House as the *Journal* went to press.

There are four new UK-based Royal Designers for Industry (Lucinda Chambers, Lauren Child, Nigel Dunnnett and Kate Hopkins) and three non-UK honorary RDIs (Hella Jongerius, Christoph Niemann and Kate Orff).

The seven RDIs work across illustration, landscape, sound, fashion and product design, and were elected through a rigorous process overseen by the RSA.

They have been recognised for their outstanding contribution to design and society, with the work of all seven aligning with the climate and social agendas of the RSA and the Faculty

of Royal Designers. The RDI title is regarded as the highest honour a designer can receive in the UK.

"The word 'design' means something different to everybody – and there are new design disciplines coming all the time. We try hard to be as inclusive as we can, and I think we have really succeeded this time. There is a lot of diversity in this new group," Charlie Paton, the incoming Master of the Faculty of Royal Designers, told the *Journal*.

Paton was due to succeed Tom Lloyd as Master of the Faculty at the ceremony on 30 November. His address described how the use of seawater for climate control and desalination could help address the many crises facing the world, including conflict, climate change, biodiversity loss, desertification, famine, malnutrition, migration and rises in sea level.



Above: author, illustrator and 2023 RDI Lauren Child

## Peston: 'courage needed to get best out of AI'

ITV Political Editor Robert Peston told an audience at RSA House that AI could stimulate huge productivity gains in the economy and transform the delivery of health services.

Discussing his new book (*Bust? Saving the economy, democracy and our sanity*) co-authored with Kishan Koria, Peston said he was "incredibly excited about the productivity gains that artificial intelligence will deliver".

He described the diagnostic ability of AI programmes in health as "extraordinary", adding: "AI for the NHS is definitely not a threat. It is a tremendous opportunity to make some inroads into these terrible waiting lists."

However, Peston warned that there are "bureaucracies here that panic" at the deployment of AI. "We do have to be courageous in these circumstances if we are going to get the most out of these technologies, but I am a believer that it is worth the risk," he said.

He also pointed to economic concerns over the widespread use of AI, including the lowering of wages.

"There is this phenomenon called Engels' Pause, where for many years during the deployment of a new technology millions of people on lower incomes lose their jobs, wages stagnate and they pay a big price for the transformation of an economy."



■ To watch the event, visit [bit.ly/3suoXLg](https://bit.ly/3suoXLg)

# RSA Catalyst Awards: Winners Announced



Since 2010, the RSA has had the privilege of assisting hundreds of Fellows in bringing their innovative ideas to light via the Catalyst Enterprise Awards programme. While the 2023 Catalyst round continues the tradition of supporting the changemakers who are testing and growing innovations to shape better futures, we have also shifted focus to better align Catalyst with the RSA's Design for Life mission, including the funding of two additional 'Regenerative Enterprise' grants.

This year, the RSA has funded a total of 11 projects, offering five Catalyst Scaling awards and six Catalyst Seed awards for a total of £62,000. As well as the additional Regenerative Enterprise grants, members of this cohort can join our Regenerative Enterprise peer learning journey. We will collectively work to define what it means to be a regenerative organisation and how we can support each other to make decisions that will positively impact the

world we wish to create today and for future generations.

The selected projects represent a diverse range of ideas and stood out for their impressive impact and significant contribution to our shared vision of resilient, rebalanced and regenerative futures. The common thread connecting them is the desire to create a better future for communities and individuals around the world.

The 2023 Catalyst Seed awardees are: Subversion Diaries, a documentation project with a goal to build an archive of practices of feminist foreign policy using narratives from within the Global South; Virtual Reality Interview Skills Enhancement, which will use virtual reality to create an immersive jobs interview training experience; Community Playbook, a project taking a co-production approach with school students in London's South Norwood to enable skills ranging from storytelling to project delivery; Shedding Light on

Long Covid, which explores the impact of long Covid on society through an installation bringing together diverse voices and experiences; and PlantIt, which aims to address segregation in urban communities through the transformation of unused gardens into thriving allotment spaces.

Catalyst Scaling awardees for 2023 include: a local production facility to manufacture banana fibre sanitary pads in Rwanda built by Minazi Consulting in conjunction with Dufatanye Organization; a microbusiness incubator empowering women living with HIV/AIDS in rural Kenya to establish small businesses; OITIJ-JO Studios, which will establish a studio to develop sustainable fashion and textile products, engaging with ethnic minority women in Tower Hamlets; Making Well, a green social prescribing programme designed to improve health and wellbeing; Trees4Croydon, an initiative focusing on tree planting as a means to mobilise communities, raise awareness of climate change, and enhance green spaces; the Indigeneity & Biomimicry in Animation Internship, a project that examines indigenous South African medicinal plants; and Our Community, Our Future, a toolkit to empower residents to take ownership of their communities and shape their future.



■ To learn more, please contact [rsa.catalyst@rsa.org.uk](mailto:rsa.catalyst@rsa.org.uk)



## Arts in the spotlight



# Magpie Dance

**B**ack in 1985 (10 years after my graduation from the London College of Dance and Drama), there were many assumptions and preconceptions about who could dance and perform on stage. Dancers with learning disabilities were not seen on mainstages performing – let alone choreographing work for public performance. At that time, Amici Dance Founder Wolfgang Stange was one of the few practitioners running dance sessions for adults with learning disabilities. After visiting a ‘Wolfgang’ session just once, I knew the direction I wanted to take with my dance teaching – and set about changing course.

Magpie Dance started as a weekly recreational session in Bromley for a group of adults with learning disabilities. At first, it was just me, two volunteers and zero resources. Our founding ethos was ‘unlocking individual potential and ability’, not ‘one size fits all’; our values and approach were founded on the social

model of disability – meaning, it is up to society to find a way of including people rather than excluding because of disability. This remains vital to Magpie Dance today, which has grown from one 45-minute offering weekly to 17 longer weekly sessions (with over 400 participants annually) across London and beyond.

In 1994, a grant of £40,000 for one year from the Foundation for Sport and the Arts made possible our first major performance (a collaboration with the Jiving Lindy Hoppers and Candoco Dance Company) at the Churchill



Theatre in Bromley. The grant provided Magpie with a massive boost, allowing us to increase our weekly offerings, and in the following years we continued to collaborate widely and to perform at even larger venues, such as Barbican Centre and Royal Festival Hall.

An investment from the National Lottery in 2001 allowed us to establish our Magpie Youth group, which today delivers eight sessions weekly across London, along with holiday programmes, for participants ages 3 to 25. At Magpie Youth, dancers take the lead, assisted by facilitators, in choreography, performance and peer-to-peer learning. The programme also offers opportunities to work with visiting companies and attend enrichment trips, and older youth dancers can become peer mentors, or even paid ambassadors who represent Magpie in external workshops and events.

Thirty-eight years on from its humble beginnings, Magpie's future is bright. In April 2023, after a highly competitive process, Magpie achieved National Portfolio Organisation status from Arts Council England, meaning it will receive core funding towards its dance programmes for the next three years. Future plans include continuing the collaboration with David Pickering MBE, of the Royal Opera House and artistic partnerships with dance practitioners and companies around the world.

I am thrilled that the legacy lives on through the next generations of dancers and Magpie's artistic team, who I am confident will continue to break boundaries.

■ *Avril Hitman, BEM, FRSA is the Founder of Magpie Dance, working as its Artistic and Executive Director from 1985 to 2017*



■ *To learn more, visit [www.magpiedance.org.uk](http://www.magpiedance.org.uk)*



## Fellowship



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■ To get started, visit [thersa.org/fellowship/community-platform](https://thersa.org/fellowship/community-platform)

### New Fellows

**Utibe Henshaw** is a Programme Manager at The Education Partnership (TEP) Centre, where she currently leads TEP Centre's contribution on the Partnership for Learning for All in Nigerian Education. The partnership works towards a more inclusive and effective education system and improved learning outcomes for pre-primary and primary school students. Utibe has a decade of experience supporting education interventions and organisations across sub-Saharan Africa.

Creative industries entrepreneur **Darrel Butlin** is a writer, film director and technologist who is passionate about creating positive social impact. He currently serves as Founder and CEO of Hexology, a digital platform pioneering a new kind of interaction design, one that empowers people to post digital media into the world around us for people to discover as they explore the Earth.

**Some Fellowship events are online:** to find out more and connect with Fellows in our global community, visit [thersa.org/events/fellowship](https://thersa.org/events/fellowship)

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**Victoria Shaskan** is a senior arts leader currently serving as CEO of Lewisham Youth Theatre, a flagship youth arts company in south-east London that supports young creatives aged 8–25. She has a background in producing professional theatre from the African diaspora, and innovating cultural programmes that engage and empower young artists and communities to create artistically challenging and socially relevant theatre.

Emeritus senior member of the Italian foreign service Professor **Paolo Sabbatini** was recently appointed Ambassador for China-Italy Cultural Communication of the World Sinology Center of China. An accomplished sinologist, Paolo is also a member of several academic institutions, including the Academy of Fine Arts in Perugia, Italy, for his achievements as a painter and a diplomat.

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# SIGNAL OR NOISE?



Test images by Kasia Molga (2023), compilation of frames based on results from The New Real generative AI platform. Image © Kasia Molga

Above: *Soul of a Sailor*, a work in progress by Kasia Molga

Artificial intelligence is profoundly shaping the way we interact with the world. What happens when artists explore the mistakes – and the poetry – that can result when humans and machines join forces?

by Drew Hemment

Generative AI is crashing like a wave through our newsfeeds, our imaginations, our relationships and the way we make sense of the world. Artists have worked with AI since the 1960s and, even before the current explosion, there has been growing interest in AI among the arts and cultural programmes. For artists working with machine-learning algorithms, the interest is rarely in optimising prediction accuracy. Instead, it is in the mistakes – and the poetry – that can result. Artists add human dimensions to AI, combining procedural, generative processes with intuition, risk and play.

The AI tools we see today are made possible by advances over the past decade in machine learning, which uses powerful algorithms to discover patterns in vast troves of data. An artist can work with AI by labelling the data on which it is trained, or fine-tuning a model using their own data, while the new generative models predict or complete the next instance based on a submitted prompt. Current models learn from internet-scale datasets and build predictions across tens of billions of parameters in a way that no human mind could ever do.

These advances are impressive, and things get really interesting as these tools become widely used. The big shift, though, is not only in the underlying models, nor even the startling capabilities that surprise even their designers, but also in their uptake and the profound ways they impact society. ▶

**Drew Hemment, FRSA** is Professor of Data Arts and Society at the University of Edinburgh, and Theme Lead for Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences at The Alan Turing Institute

## “Machine logic has no necessary relationship with the way a human thinks; it is very different from our everyday human way of understanding and representing the world”

### The new real

Just as we spoke of the ‘new normal’ after the digital turn, we can speak of the ‘new real’ following the generative turn. The media we consume, the words we read, what we believe and say, our very social reality, are increasingly shaped algorithmically. This is playing out in the workplace, in our ability to organise democratically, and throughout our arts and culture. The images and words generated by AI are called ‘synthetic media’, so I would suggest we can also talk about ‘synthetic culture’ or ‘synthetic society’, to think through the ways in which AI shapes and is shaped by human customs, arts, institutions and achievements.

Human communication and culture are fundamentally changed when carried out in collaboration with intelligent machines. In widely applied deep learning algorithms, the inner workings of the model may be implicit and distributed. Machine logic has no necessary relationship with the way a human thinks; it is very different from our everyday human way of understanding and representing the world. It uses statistical methods to make classifications and predictions, and it is probabilistic, telling us

Below: Sougwen Chung, artist, researcher and founder of SCILICET, whose 2020 work *The Creative (Force)* features on the cover of this issue. She is considered a pioneer in the field of human-machine collaboration



what ‘might be’, not what ‘is’. This is different from the ways people understand why one decision was made and not another.

The power of these tools is astounding. But, trained on data we generate, AI both reflects society and is also deeply political. The large foundation models we see today are in many ways the high point of extractive capitalism. They are made possible by data mining at a massive scale, both from past databases and online transactions, including the data people freely give up when they use social media or post online. They depend on globalised access to cheap labour and rare earth minerals. They require computer resources only the very large companies possess. And they are built through centralising business models that funnel value to the very few. AI is now geopolitical, part of the tussle between Washington and Beijing. Those countries that can are striving for a ‘sovereign AI’ capability, and most of the world is looking helplessly on. An open-source movement in generative AI is gaining ground, and could overtake the current model. But as of today, it dominates, as we see in large language models trained on data scraped indiscriminately from the public internet without reward for the original creators.

There is a lot of noise, hype and distraction in the space right now, and we need clear vision. But, because of the move to data-driven systems and increased complexity of algorithms, the current tools are black-boxed, and opaque to human understanding. To make sense of data-driven methods – machine-learning and pattern recognition models in particular – requires a detailed understanding of the often dynamic data context in which they operate, and even experts may not easily be able to determine what a system ‘knows’.

We pass another threshold when AI models are trained on the outputs of yet other models. This is a multiplier for everything we have discussed. When synthetic media becomes synthetic training data and is used to train new models, we get a feedback loop amplifying those features. The more our culture is generated by or with machine-learning algorithms, the more our culture, the shared ideas and customs that bind us, becomes unfamiliar, estranged, unknowable.

### Truth of AI

The New Real is a research centre, jointly convened by the University of Edinburgh and

Image courtesy of the artist



The Alan Turing Institute, which explores AI, creativity and futures. We publish research, develop AI technologies, and regularly support and collaborate with a vibrant community of artists working with and on AI. Over the past decade in particular, a creative community of critical AI artists has responded to advances in machine-learning algorithms, and the wider availability of data and computing capacity. This community shows us how synthetic culture can be enriching, when AI is not reduced to a tool for productivity, and it has sparked and convened important debates and conversations around the art, science and politics of AI. We believe this is a vital source of collective sense-making, one that can help a wider range of voices feed into AI policy and design.

Artists help us to explore and understand the ‘truth of AI’, the uncanny nature of synthetic media, and help us to envision, and maybe even realise, alternative possibilities. Sougwen Chung, featured on the cover of this edition of the *Journal*, reframes our relationship to the non-human – with her use of AI as collaborator – and also to each other, by promoting an idea of collective authorship that builds on the prior input of many human hands. To Chung, “the canvas is no longer blank”, and even the intimate and embodied act of drawing becomes an interaction with other creators, both human and non-human.

In an artist residency with The New Real, titled ‘AI is Human After All’, Anna Ridler and Caroline Sinderson explored the hidden human labour involved in creating and deploying AI. The artists create their own datasets of photographic images, then painstakingly and

meticulously extract patterns from the observed data using manual methods. This turns a foundational definition in AI on its head, with the human artists performing a task usually carried out by the computer and associated with machine intelligence. Their practice debunks the neat representations of ‘autonomous’ systems and raises wider questions around human bias and worker exploitation.

*The Zizi Show*, by Jake Elwes, is a deepfake drag act generated by AI trained on video and motion-tracking data of multiple human performers. A first iteration was commissioned by The New Real for the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 2019, and a later iteration for Edinburgh International Festival in 2021. Elwes’ purpose is to confront the lack of representation for the LGBTQ+ community in data, and to conjure positive images of non-binary performing bodies, to represent an expansion of possibilities for our sexual and gender identities. Digital avatars trained using motion capture data from real performers morph and transform into captivating figures that defy categorisation.

Above: Stills from *The Zizi Show* (2019–21) by Jake Elwes

Below: *The Thames Path 2040* by Alex Fefegha





Above:  
*Circular  
 Diffusion*  
 (2022)  
 by Adam  
 Harvey

The environment and climate has been a constant thread for The New Real. An early work was *AWEN: A Walk Encountering Nature*, by Inés Cámara Leret working with a multidisciplinary team. In this, a self-guided walk supported by a mobile app enabled a global audience during the COP26 United Nations Climate Change Conference to have a meditative experience of their environment, to overcome the disconnect between global climate information and local, lived experience. In *The Thames Path 2040*, Alex Fefegha used climate forecast

data and a generative adversarial network on The New Real's platform to create speculative imagery of what Londoners might lose and what will remain in a future where heavy rainfall will lead to increased and widespread flooding.

Over the last year, The New Real, working with the Scottish AI Alliance, commissioned five artists to explore the uncanny interplay of humans and machines, and the social implications of recent developments in AI. All presented a video on their findings, and one of those artists, the UK- and Netherlands-based Polish artist

Kasia Molga, has been commissioned to develop a new work. In a powerfully personal project, Molga is using The New Real's AI platform to explore her father's diaries from his life working on the Mediterranean Sea, combined with public records of ships' logs and climate data, to bring a fresh perspective on the world's oceans that he travelled throughout his life.

### Finding the artistic signal

One question that has become louder is whether generative AI is good for the arts. In a February 2023 article in *The New Yorker*, the science fiction writer Ted Chiang asks if generative AI can help humans with the creation of original art. He gives us a powerful metaphor for current generative models: they are a "blurry JPEG of the web", comparable to a 'lossy' data compression technique, where data size is reduced by discarding some information, which then becomes unrecoverable.

Even with the most carefully curated and comprehensively compiled training data, the current generative AI gives us "a superficial approximation of the real thing, but no more than that". It is like "placing an existing document on an unreliable photocopier and pressing the Print button". Chiang argues that, while there is a genre of art known as photocopy art, that doesn't mean photocopiers have become an essential tool for artists, or will produce good art.

The work of AI artists enables us to see that even the limitations of current AI can be the basis for powerful and compelling art. Returning to the example of Elwes' *Zizi*, this work can be read as a 'blurry jpeg', and yet it is so much more besides. Elwes holds up the blurry jpeg of the AI outputs as a sign, to illuminate the preternatural, uncanny nature of AI and to celebrate the non-binary identities of the human performers. An artwork such as *Zizi* generates something new and meaningful from prior information. It isn't, to quote Chiang, a "blurry copy of unoriginal work"; it is an original use of blurriness to say something important and to create something beautiful. This highlights why the work of artists such as Elwes is so strong; it makes a virtue of the lossy nature of generative AI. It points us towards a singular and edifying kind of blurriness, and that is what makes it good art.

Elwes worked with original performers in a way that was empowering, not parasitic. Similarly, we need to think beyond generative AI simply helping artists by generating a first

**“The work of AI artists enables us to see that even the limitations of current AI can be the basis for powerful and compelling art”**

draft or sketch. We should instead watch and learn from AI artists, to see how generative AI can be a material we can work with, and also find an impetus or provocation to inspire us to co-create work that is meaningful with intelligent machines.

In the work of these artists we see outlines of a plurality of synthetic cultures emerging. AI is likely to weave its way into many more devices, interfaces and tools that we use to create and communicate; it is already pervasive and ubiquitous in a way that photocopiers or paintbrushes never will be. That doesn't mean that AI will be essential to art, or that all 'creative' applications of AI give us art. But what we are seeing in the works being created by our New Real artists is that there is a vital and important field of critical AI art, one that enriches culture, and helps us to ask difficult questions. ■

*Feminist Data Set* on exhibit at SOHO20, July 2018



Football







# ART GOALS

How a North London stadium became home to the first gallery devoted to football and the culture that surrounds it

by Eddy Frankel

At a major Sotheby's auction in 2015, just as Gerhard Richter's *Abstraktes Bild* was breaking the record for most expensive work by a living artist, a football match was kicking off. Tottenham Hotspur were playing Liverpool. My twin loves of art and football were clashing. I was meant to be writing a report on this landmark auction, but my attention was elsewhere. Quietly, covertly, I found a stream of the game on my phone. Sure, paintings by the greats of 20th-century art were being sold for astronomical sums (*Abstraktes Bild* eventually sold for \$46.3m), but Harry Kane was also about to score his 23rd goal for Spurs and, well, priorities.

Like so many people, my teenhood was full of categories and genres, choices to make and tribes to belong to. It was the classic fork in the teenage road: are you a jock or a geek, are you into sports or arts? My colours were pinned to the mast of music and art and, from then on, my love for football was hidden away. Once I became the art critic for a major London publication, it started to feel more like a dirty secret than a hidden passion.

But at that Sotheby's auction, I suddenly wasn't alone in my dual affinities. People had gathered behind me and, eventually, more than a dozen people were watching the football match on a phone in an auction house, and something clicked – the binary was gone. You could like sport and art at the same time. Even in the same place.

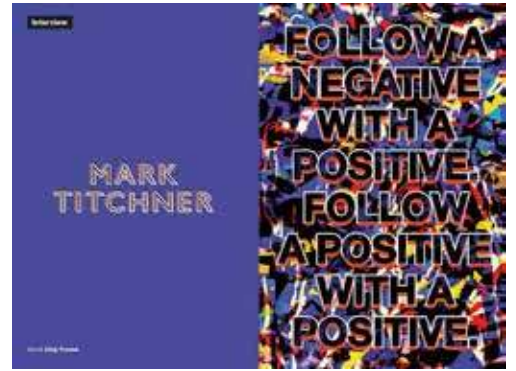
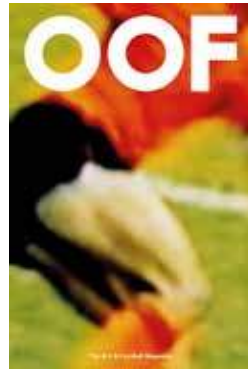
This triggered a period of feverish research leading me to the discovery that countless artists throughout history had used football in their work. And the art was good. There ▶



Images courtesy of OOF Gallery

'The World of Gazza!!' show ran at OOF Gallery from April to September 2023

**“The idea, from the start, was to use football as a lure to get people to engage with art”**



**Eddy Frankel** is *Time Out* London's Art and Culture Editor and art critic. He is also a co-founder of *OOF* magazine and the OOF Gallery at the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium

were 16th-century Dutch landscapes with kids kicking a pig's bladder around, surrealist paintings of hallucinatory goals, contemporary video installations, performance pieces... all using football to deal with ideas ranging from passion, belief and belonging to bigotry, pain and movement. There was Hank Willis Thomas turning football shirts into Asafo flags as a comment on tribalism and racism. There was Eddie Peake creating naked five-a-side performance pieces to quite literally lay bare ideas of machismo and masculinity. There was Francis Alys filming a flaming ball being kicked through a deserted Mexican border town. There was just so much to explore, to say, to think about.

That was the genesis of OOF, a project (launched alongside gallerists Justin and Jennie Hammond) that started as a biannual magazine about the relationship between art and football, and which has now grown into a gallery situated in the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium. The idea, from the start, was to use football as a lure to get people to engage with

art. The magazine worked, featuring articles on art being created by artists such as Juergen Teller, Chris Ofili and Rene Magritte. But we wanted to push it further.

**Gallery view**

It's in the gallery that we can really engage with the public. The space – a Grade II listed townhouse that the stadium itself is built around – is accessed through the club shop, meaning we get over 20,000 visitors a year, over 95% of whom have never been to a contemporary art gallery. That's a privilege and a responsibility, but it's also a challenge. How do you curate art and photography exhibitions that can appeal to everyday sport fans, without compromising or dumbing down the work you're showing? How do you curate for local children and youth groups who don't regularly get taken to museums?

We've shown work by major art figures like Sarah Lucas, Martin Parr and Hank Willis Thomas, as well as by brilliant early-career artists. Some of the art has made an immediate impact on viewers, some has been a bit more





challenging. But our latest show has been our biggest success in terms of reaching the public.

‘The World of Gazza!!’ is based on a series of posters for imaginary exhibitions created in the 1990s by the Turner Prize-winning artist Jeremy Deller. We made that dream show a reality, bringing together memorabilia, archive material, existing artworks and new commissions to explore the figure of Paul Gascoigne, one of England’s greatest ever footballers.

Visitors come in to see the shirt he wore in Euro 96, or a pre-match meal list from his time at Spurs, and end up encountering paintings by Lydia Blakeley and Glen Pudvine, and artworks by Douglas Gordon and Jeremy Deller. They’re seeing art placed not on a pedestal, but on a level playing field with memorabilia and archive material. It makes them realise that art can be, and is, for them.

**Play on**

For the school groups, both primary and secondary, that we’ve welcomed to the gallery, the football elements act as an access point, a

way into what can often be a difficult subject. We create an unthreatening, unpatronising environment for art viewing. Our workshops see kids and teenagers creating sculptures based on footballs, or drawings based on kit colours. It’s art without the artifice or intimidation factor of your typical art gallery.

What we’ve learned over the past years is that we can use football as a sort of Trojan horse for getting art into people’s lives. They come to see a match or go on a stadium tour and find themselves looking at a painting. I said from the start that if we managed to convert just one out of every 1,000 visitors into art fans, we’d be a success. We just didn’t realise how much of an open goal that would be.

The real trick, it turns out, will be to see if we can get any art history graduates to go watch a football match. ■

Above and below: spreads from OOF magazine



For more information, visit [www.oofgallery.com](http://www.oofgallery.com)



# “If you can solve Bradford, you can solve the UK”

Self-confessed ‘insane geek’ Syima Aslam speaks to Andy Haldane about how cultural activity can build stronger communities and drive economic growth

**Andy Haldane:** *I’m interested in your background prior to founding the Bradford Literature Festival (BLF). Why Bradford? And what drew you to art and culture and literature?*

**Syima Aslam:** I’ve always been hugely interested in reading and books, mainly fairy tales and fantasy. I’m all about the escapism, maybe because I’m an only child, and so books were my companions a lot of the time. But what really cemented my interest in terms of arts and culture and how that led to the Bradford Literature Festival was that I’m a second-generation migrant to this country. My parents were first generation, and anybody who knows anything about people migrating into a country knows that most people have this myth of return that they’re always going to go back home.

I spent the early years of my life literally going back ‘home’. My mother went to Pakistan when she was pregnant, and I was born there. I came back to the UK when I was four months, went back when I was a year and a half, came back when I was two and a half. I went to nursery, then went back to Pakistan when I was five years old, and that was meant to be for good. Then, at eight years old, lo and behold, we were back in the UK.

When I finally came to the UK for good, I had lost all my English. My mother was told, “It doesn’t matter where you live. Just live in one place, so she can actually get a consistent education.” I grew up in Halifax, which had (and still has) the grammar school system. We also had family friends who told her, “She needs to pass the 11+,” so my mother very single-mindedly was ▶

**Syima Aslam**  
MBE is the  
Founder, CEO  
and Artistic  
Director of  
Bradford  
Literature  
Festival

**Andy Haldane**  
is Chief Executive  
Officer at the RSA



Photos courtesy of Bradford Literature Festival

then determined that this was going to happen. She made it clear that I was going to pass my 11+ “or else”. I have no idea what the “or else” was, but for her, that translated to taking me to the library once a week!

All of that really influenced me in terms of setting up the BLF. I was so lucky I had that push. I had somebody who understood the importance of reading. I have a very simplistic belief that education has the power to change lives and that literacy is the absolute foundation stone of that.

**Haldane:** *I think you've already started to answer my second question, which is, where did the idea for the BLF come from and how did you make the idea a reality?*

**Aslam:** My first job was in inward investment and regeneration in London, and that was really interesting from the point of view of, not only, what makes an area attractive for companies to invest in, but also how do you retain companies? The last piece of work that I did before I set up the festival was looking at long-term strategies for the further education college in Bradford, and the thing that I was really struck by was that Bradford is the UK's youngest city and one of its most diverse.

Doing that piece of work allowed me to get to know the city in a way that I might not otherwise have experienced. Not only was I able to see where Bradford was from a regeneration point of view, but also doing the work in the education sector made me realise that a lot of that population growth is coming from certain areas of the city, and most of those areas have schools that were not doing terribly well.

I was also looking at the jobs of the future that had been predicted by the West Yorkshire economic partnership, and I was just really struck by the fact that these kids were never going to have the education attainment which meant they would get those jobs.

I felt very strongly that, when certain communities are seen as ‘problematic’, this is how you end up with race riots (like the July 2001 Bradford race riots) and communities not working together. With over 150 languages spoken in Bradford and all the successive migrations from the Jewish German to the Eastern European, I felt you could perhaps create something that would change narratives and bring people together.

But the key driver for me was around children and young people. During my second year at grammar school, I did really badly in my maths. My mum went to my parents' evening, and she doesn't speak English, so with the aid of a translator she said to my maths teacher, “Does she need a tutor?”, and he said, “No, it's fine. I'll give her some extra lessons.” He was a lovely gentleman, Mr Hudley, and then he said something that stayed with me all my life. He said, “If you weren't intelligent, you wouldn't be here. If you don't understand, it's because we're not teaching you in the right way.”

I look back at that, and I think, how many children fall between the cracks because they're told they're not intelligent when, really, they're just not being taught in the right way?

So, the Bradford Literature Festival was, I suppose, set up as a social intervention. I felt that what children and young people needed to see was that they could go to a literature festival and be included. The other literature festivals I was going to had a very particular audience, and while they are great and are important and I love them, the people in those rooms are actually already engaged, while the people who need to be hearing those conversations aren't there. The children and young people there have books. They're growing up with books. Their parents are engaged and they're taking them to these events. But the children who actually need to be turned on to these things, that provision isn't there for them.

**Haldane:** *The first BLF took place in 2014. Can you tell me a bit about the BLF journey from there to 2023?*

**Aslam:** I'm not from the arts and culture world. I had no idea about creating festivals; 2014 was a marker in the ground. It was two days, 25 events and about 900 attendees. Now we are one of the largest festivals in the country. In 2023 we ran 678 events and had 116,000 attendees.

The festival has an educational programme because that's a way to engage young people who wouldn't normally be brought to a literature festival. It has an ethical ticketing policy because that's how you bring in people who are socio-economically diverse. For me, that's the most important thing. Over those nine years, we've had over 550,000 audience members from over 30 countries. Our audience diversity averages at 54%. Our artistic diversity averages at

Left: Aslam on stage with Booker Prize-winning author Ben Okri at the BLF, July 2023



about 44%. We've had artists from more than 72 countries and over 210,000 children and young people attend. I know we're seen as quite a business innovative disruptor in the culture sector, but, to me, most of the things that we do are just purely common sense.

**Haldane:** *Having been to and spoken at the last couple of BLFs, I can absolutely attest to the vibrancy and the energy and the diversity of it, which is quite unlike anything else I have been to and a huge testament to what you've been able to achieve over nine years. Can you say a bit more about your focus on younger people and your education programme? Who are the kids that are coming and what are they getting from the festival?*

**Aslam:** We do work with schools year-round, but the education programme runs during the festival itself. The programme is an integral part of the festival and speaks to the same kinds of themes that the main festival is speaking to. In terms of the children who attend, so far, we've engaged with about 80% of the primary and secondary schools in Bradford and we also get schools from Kirklees, Leeds, Calderdale, South Yorkshire and London as well, and a lot of home educators.

The idea for the education programme came from the fact that we run a stream of events

**“I have a very simplistic belief that education has the power to change lives and that literacy is the absolute foundation stone of that”**

during the festival which are free, and which run at the weekends to enable parents to attend with their children. I realised early on that, unless you're really switched on to these things as parents, you're probably not even going to know that there's a literature festival taking place. For most of the people who we wanted to get to come to these things, a literature festival would not be a natural thing to go to; it wouldn't be something that they would see as being for them. The education programme emerged from that. It was an intervention, if you like, a solution for how to make the children and young people who wouldn't normally engage with these things aware of the festival.

The key goal, in terms of that programme, is raising aspirations and literacy levels. The aspirations part comes very much from making sure young people are welcome at the main programme and are able to see people who look like themselves.

**Haldane:** *How does culture, and the BLF in particular, help in that big regeneration effort which is absolutely under way in Bradford now? ▶*

Right:  
Aslam on  
stage at the  
BLF Sufiana  
event, July  
2023



**“In a city like Bradford, it would be criminal not to be ambitious and not to be leading the way”**

**Aslam:** The festival has been a key part of Bradford moving forward, probably in ways that I certainly didn't envisage when I first set it up. Over the last nine years I have seen tremendous shifts in the sector itself. Because BLF has been and is very ambitious, that actually helped to promote ambition in the culture sector in Bradford, which traditionally has been a little hesitant.

Obviously, as with any cultural event, there is also the economic impact. I mentioned we've had visitors from over 30 countries; that means hotel nights and people spending on new restaurants and a change in terms of the image of the city. What's been really lovely for us was

that, when Bradford received the UK City of Culture accolade, the BLF was independently cited by a number of different newspapers and also awarding bodies as being one of the key reasons for Bradford to receive the award. BLF has been instrumental in showing what can be achieved in cities like Bradford.

There are two sides to the wider economic impact. There is the hard economic impact, in terms of what the festival creates, and then there is the future economic impact. The entire youth programme is free. The education programme that we provide for schools is free. The events for children and young people in the festival are free. Sixty per cent of our tickets during the festival, in terms of the ticketed programme, are offered for free. This creates future economic impact, which we can't measure in that kind of hard way, but we get qualitative feedback about

Photos courtesy of Bradford Literature Festival



it. Teachers will tell us, “Well, this young person would never have considered university but now, they’re really interested.” Just the idea that we are planting a seed that actually then grows is so powerful. Without that kind of aspiration, without that kind of hope, we can’t create that future economic impact.

**Haldane:** *It seems to me you are talking about a ‘wide-angle’ view of what we mean by ‘regeneration’ because, of course, the BLF and, in time, ‘City of Culture’, will generate jobs and income and will attract business and people. But the wider role in social connections of various types, and in people with different backgrounds and beliefs finding common cause through culture strikes me as, particularly in this moment, important not just in Bradford but right across the world.*

**Aslam:** Absolutely. I find it surprising that there aren’t more festivals like the BLF. The first day I started working on BLF full-time in March 2014 was also the day the first UKIP councillor was elected in Keighley. I find it interesting that the conversations that we are having are becoming increasingly more urgent rather than less. I don’t see some of these conversations happening in other spaces and it is really, really important that we have these conversations on a platform that is public and accessible to everyone.

**Haldane:** *You’ve seen tremendous success and growth over nine years, and the 2023 festival was a fantastic return after some difficult Covid years. Tell me what lies in store – without giving away too many secrets, of course – for your 10th birthday next year.*

**Aslam:** In a city like Bradford, it would be criminal not to be ambitious and to not be leading the way. We talk about the North–South divide, and we talk about how London is this natural hub for culture, but when you create things in places like Bradford, it creates a whole other level of hope and impact beyond something that will be in London.

Somebody once said to me, “If you can solve Bradford, you can solve the UK.” I don’t know how completely true that is, but I certainly think that, if you can bring people together to create a solution to the challenges that a city like Bradford has, that solution is easily replicated in a variety of cities.

**Haldane:** *In a speech of yours in 2018 you said that the BLF team calls you an ‘insane geek’. First, I want to know what you meant by that. Second, does that help explain the richness and eclecticism that the festival embodies and has embodied under your leadership?*

**Aslam:** Yes, that is a quote of mine! I can’t quite remember what we were talking about, but I said to a member of my team, “Oh, that will make a brilliant event and that is so interesting,” and she said to me, “You would find watching paint dry interesting, you’re such a geek!” I’ve always described my head as a ‘butterfly head’ because I’m hugely interested in practically everything. I don’t see how you can build empathy otherwise. You have to be able to stand in lots of different spaces.

Since then, I learned that I am neurodiverse and have attention deficit disorder, and I think that fits in perfectly with having a ‘butterfly head’ that’s interested in everything. One of my friends actually said, “Anybody who knows you really well knows that the festival is a mind map of your head!” I’m quite proud of being a geek. We need geeks in the world.

**Haldane:** *Can you use that vivid imagination of yours and the ‘insane geek’ in you to tell me a story of how things could be 20 or 25 years hence, of how the festival might be, how Bradford might be, and how the north of England might be when it comes to its culture offering?*

**Aslam:** My hope would be that, when we get to our 25- or 30-year anniversary, the North has connectivity, and that our country, which is so tiny compared with so many others, would have opened up its economic capacity in the North by creating better linkages. Not just across the North, but between the North and the South, because, when you look at cities like Bradford with that young population, it’s a tremendous economic powerhouse for the future.

My hope would be that we will have a better understanding of each other across communities, and that the North has stopped being the poor cousin of the South. That we understand that, to retain and actually strengthen and develop our economic position in the world, we need a connected country rather than a divided country, and that young people in the North and young people from poorer socio-economic backgrounds deserve the same chances – because that unlocks the potential for the entire country. ■



Image by E.J. Westmacott / Alamy Stock Photo, artwork by Wardour

# TAKING FLIGHT

A new research hub explores how building corridors of creative industries could accelerate growth across a pan-northern ‘supercluster’

by Jonathan Sapsed

This summer, in partnership with the RSA and with funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), Newcastle University became the lead for the Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre (Creative PEC). We are currently building a research hub that will soon house the largest concentration of economists and social scientists working on the creative industries anywhere in the country.

With teams in both Newcastle and London, the twin-hub model provides unparalleled opportunity to support the growth of the creative industries – growing jobs, skills, income and exports, health and happiness – in communities right across the UK. As RSA Chief Executive Andy Haldane has said: “The UK needs a creativity revolution, and the Creative PEC can be its centrepiece.”

So, how do we deliver this revolution? Currently, the creative industries in the North of England contribute less gross value added (GVA: the value generated by creative businesses over and above their inputs) than those in the South. They are disconnected from many market opportunities and perhaps have less access to decisions and investments. But there is enormous

talent, outstanding universities and businesses, and many conditions which, in some respects, are more favourable than those in the South, such as working space and lower variable costs.

The North has a strong regional identity and a sense of belonging, a crucial ‘pride of place’ that can help fuel ambitious creative projects. The North’s iconography is derived from its cultural assets, such as the grand historical architecture of northern city centres and cultural venues, its pop culture – from The Beatles to Sam Fender – as well as contemporary art: think David Hockney’s iPad paintings of Yorkshire landscapes or Antony Gormley’s *Angel of the North*. Furthermore, the policy infrastructure of the North, with established and impactful mayoral authorities that are currently expanding through devolution, can help accelerate action.

## **Talent, technology and tolerance**

Creatives are attracted to live and work in the North of England for its quality of life, which is enhanced by the combination of dynamic cities and easy access to outstanding natural beauty. This is a driver of creative clusters, as characterised by the economic geographer Richard Florida, who introduced the idea of ▶

**Jonathan Sapsed** is Professor of Innovation and Entrepreneurship at Newcastle University Business School

## “There is clear opportunity for the North of England to develop a cross-regional strategy to support the growth of the creative industries”

a ‘creative class’ attracted to a place for its amenities and lifestyles, often in university towns, or with easy access to nature.

Once a critical mass is in place, these creative clusters emerge and begin to innovate and grow businesses and projects, displaying “talent, technology and tolerance”. The last of these indicates openness to diversity and ideas. There is a debate about to what extent creative clusters can be deliberately ‘set up’ and to what extent they must necessarily form organically. But there is little doubt that local authorities, agents and policies can create the conditions to attract creative people and organisations.

This is the starting point for the recent briefing paper, Northern England’s Creative Industries, published in partnership by the RSA and Creative PEC with support from several authors (Hasan Bakhshi, Heather Carey, Salvatore di Novo, Eliza Easton, Giorgio Fazio, Annie Gascoyne, Andy Haldane, Tom Kenyon, Josh Siepel and myself). There is a clear opportunity for the North of England to develop a cross-regional strategy to support the growth of the creative industries. Our new briefing paper sets out a path towards a North of England Creative Corridor, both as an exemplar and test model for such superclusters across the UK.

Below: The Beatles in the movie *A Hard Day’s Night* (1964)



### ‘Rivals’ succeeding together

Creative PEC research shows that clusters of intense creative activity in the North are more geographically dispersed than those in the supercluster of London and the South-East. As such, the North would benefit from a coordinated plan that builds on existing strengths and maintains local specificities. Such a strategy would not be a zero-sum game: previous research by Nesta suggests that regional ‘rivals’ are more successful when they work together to grow their creative industries.

The opportunity is considerable. As a share of the local economy, the creative industries in the North currently contribute less than 3% to GVA. In London and the South-East, this sector share is closer to 10%. If the North were to grow its sector share even relatively modestly, the growth benefits would be considerable. For example, if the sector share rose to around half of the levels in London and the South-East, this would be equivalent to an annual GVA boost of around £10bn by 2030. If realised, this would make a significant contribution to the government’s sector vision target for the UK, which is to grow the creative industries by £50bn by 2030.

Moreover, this growth would benefit the whole of the UK, because a stronger northern creative economy is good for exports and investment, which, in turn, increases demand for content and services from creative businesses in the rest of the economy. To unlock this potential, there are several pre-conditions for growth to be considered, including critical areas of national policy (such as on immigration) and areas of policy set at both national and regional levels that have knock-on effects across the economy (such as transport or digital infrastructure).

The briefing paper provides an outline for how policy and industry leaders in the North could supercharge growth in the creative industries through a coordinated focus on skills, access to finance and investment in innovation. The ambition should be a coherent plan that will allow creative industries in the North to thrive over the coming decade and develop into a supercluster to complement the London and South-East creative supercluster.

The ‘corridor’ effect can be both coordinated and evolving through organic development. Clusters within a commutable distance start to see an exchange of employment and skills, especially because some creative sectors are volatile and depend on one-off, unpredictable

investments. For example, a video games developer might win a contract for a Triple A branded project, and suddenly need a major influx of programmers, artists, animators and QA testers. The immediate cluster may not be able to supply all these jobs, but there will be eager talent available in a nearby cluster.

This has been the long-term behaviour in the video games clusters at various points along the M23 corridor. The city of Brighton and Hove was previously home to big studios such as Relentless and Black Rock, which, though now closed, generated new spin-off companies in the sector, often exploiting new platforms and markets. The same effects have occurred in Crawley with the likes of Bullfrog and Lionhead, originally set up by the visionary game designer Peter Molyneux.

The labour pool traverses the ‘corridor’ between the clusters, as the talent navigates the vagaries of a dynamic sector. This can also engender a degree of competition, as firms look to ‘poach’ the talent they need, so the corridors are highly dependent on networks that use them and personal associations.

### **The spillover effect**

Over time, commuting leads to spillover effects as creatives move out of the clusters in surrounding towns and rural areas. The M23 corridor is sometimes known as ‘Greater Brighton’ as the cluster disperses along the corridor. The Coast-to-Capital Local Enterprise Partnership in this region saw its role as promoting innovation projects and strengthening connections, for example, to facilitate data analytics start-ups to scope use cases for datasets generated at Gatwick Airport. Large anchor organisations can also facilitate a corridor effect between clusters, as the BBC has done between its bases in Cardiff and Bristol, pulling in collaboration with universities in the Welsh and South-West region.

Given these examples, how can a Northern Corridor initiative join up the assets in a new and dynamic way? A question here is degrees of specialisation and whether regions wish to fight on all fronts or specialise? Realistically there will be competition, but there are also wins from coordination and targeting skills gaps across the North, such as the planned Crown Works Studios in Sunderland, slated to create 8,450 jobs and become one of the largest filmmaking complexes in Europe.



With wider problems with the ecosystem, including transport and lack of investors, it cannot only be the creative industries getting their house in order. A collective approach would be a stronger case for investment and better infrastructure.

Stakeholders including Arts Council England, the BBC and Channel 4 are all supporting this initiative. Their role will be to offer a degree of investment, to identify opportunities and make connections, but it’s up to northern creative industry stakeholders to realise the potential.

The key here is the devolution agenda with its incoming resources and blank slate, and the need for reducing regional inequalities through levelling up. Many mayors have already backed the notion of the Northern Creative Corridor – indeed Tracy Brabin, the mayor of West Yorkshire, has been a key architect of the vision. The scope and form the project may take is open to collaboration, while the opportunity is vast. ■

Above: *The Arrival of Spring in Woldgate, East Yorkshire in 2011*, by David Hockney, iPad drawing printed on paper





Photo by Aron Klein

# WILD IDEAS

When studies showed even images of nature could have a positive effect on wellbeing, a public art venture on a grand scale was born

by Lee Baker

In 2019, studies appearing in *Frontiers in Psychology* showed that just a 20-minute walk in nature is enough to significantly improve mood and reduce feelings of stress and anxiety. That a walk in nature improves your mood may seem unsurprising. What's not so obvious is that studies showed that even exposure to simple images of nature can have a positive effect on the mind.

This is a finding with potentially massive ramifications given that (according to the Barcelona Institute for Global Health) more than 60% of city dwellers in Europe live in areas with insufficient green space. A 2012 study by Camiel J Beukeboom, Dion Langveld and Karin Tanja-Dijkstra showed that viewing images of nature increases activity in brain regions associated with attention and emotion regulation, as well as increased alpha-wave activity associated with relaxation and meditative states.

Enter the Graphic Rewilding project, our mission to improve quality of life through nature-inspired public art.

## Extinction of experience

I've always said that Watford, where I grew up, was 'a brilliant place to leave'. To me it was a dull, urban satellite of London and, like so many kids who grew up in similar urban environments, I had, for many years, a total ambivalence to real nature. I was far more at home rummaging for car parts in scrap yards than playing Poohsticks in the local river. ▶

**Baker & Borowski** is an artist-curator partnership between music producer and painter Lee Baker and sculptor and placemaking specialist Catherine Borowski. Since 2017, they have worked together to bring art into the everyday urban landscape. After 27 shows collaborating with some of Europe's best-known artists, they began their current public art venture, Graphic Rewilding

Left: Borowski and Baker in front of *Blue Flag Iris* billboard, Edmonton, London (2022)



**“The city is our canvas, and in London alone we have covered nearly 4.5 square kilometres with our artworks”**

Above:  
Graphic  
Rewilding at  
Lewes Castle,  
East Sussex  
(2022)

Below:  
Lee Baker,  
*Iris* painting  
(2023)

At some point long after leaving Watford, I read about a phenomenon known as ‘the extinction of experience’, where people simply forget what nature actually is, and so lose empathy for the natural world. I thought, “that was me!” Based on a complete lack of experience, I grew up with zero connection to (or interest in) nature.

It is perhaps for this reason that my artwork has always seemed to exist in, and attempted to tackle, the questions raised by urban environments. I loved the attitude and output of artists like Andy Goldsworthy and Richard Long, who manipulated natural environments, but the countryside was not my natural stomping ground. So I adapted their ethos of working only with the materials available to them, and applied it to the local scrap yards which, ignoring health and safety, were happy to pile cars up for me and let me paint them. Studying fine art in Newcastle in the 1990s, I



was able to explore a city with more than its fair share of dereliction and degradation, and I used the detritus that I found washed up on the shores of the River Tyne in my work.

**Waking up to nature**

Then, something extraordinary happened. About 10 years ago I had what I can only describe as ‘a bit of a breakdown’. I felt uncomfortable in my own skin, and for six months the only thing that could soothe my troubled mind was drawing flowers. As I recovered, I wanted to dig a little deeper into why this made me feel better, and soon I was on the precipice of an epic, exciting – and slightly out of my intellectual depth – research rabbit hole.

In attempting to analyse my therapeutic flower drawing, I realised that my ability to find happiness through nature and my evolution towards a more biophilic sensibility came not through walks in the woods, but through my passion for nature in art. Not just paintings, prints and graphic design, but also tattoos, television, social media and, also, believe it or not, through video games.

I can’t tell you how relaxing I have found it to wander, often on virtual horseback, through the epic and beautiful landscapes of games like *Horizon Zero Dawn* or *Ghost of Tsushima*. Or imagine, during a high-speed supercar race in *Gran Turismo*, pulling over on a lay-by just to take a look at the stormy sunset on the horizon.

Ridiculous, right? But tests by Giovanna Calogiuri of University of South-Eastern Norway have shown that people who are exposed to nature in virtual reality and video games experience lower levels of stress and higher levels of positivity compared with those who are exposed to virtual urban environments. I wasn’t the only one who was garnering the benefits of nature, one step removed.

**Enter rewilding**

Bolstered by all the thinking around ‘virtual nature’, we founded Graphic Rewilding as an artistic counterbalance to the severe lack of green space in cities. We wanted to create vast, flower-inspired, maximalist, positivity-inducing artworks and immersive environments in often-overlooked urban spaces. Our vibrant images of nature are set in opposition to the grey concrete jungle, and though these may not provide the same environmental and psychological benefits as real nature, our experience and all those

Photos by Lee Baker





studies we read had convinced us that our art could inspire people to connect and empathise a little more with the natural world – and hopefully mitigate some of the negative effects that a lack of exposure to green space could cause.

So far, it seems to be working. In the early days of Graphic Rewilding, we created a project inspired by Victorian pleasure gardens on some ugly, unused, asphalted land on a busy road in Earl’s Court, London. We had discovered the Cremorne Gardens, a pleasure garden that flourished in the 19th century. The original gateway still exists, and our artistic interpretation was a colourful blend of sculptural gateway, flower art and planting. As soon as we opened it to the public, people flooded in and used the space to play, eat lunch and just to relax. People told us there was hardly any public green space in the area and that even our theatrical garden was a hugely welcome addition to their community.

And this isn’t an isolated reaction – we encounter this type of response time and time again. The city is

our canvas, and in London alone we have covered nearly 4.5 square kilometres with our artworks.

We begin a project by researching the area, including the local flora and residents! This helps us to create images that act as the basis for a creative immersive environment. Our nature-inspired installations have given building facades floral makeovers, added meadows to billboards and graphically rewilded entire streets complete with floors and street furniture. We have also reached into the digital realm, with mobile-animated augmented reality experiences enhancing our work.

How fascinating that our brains can be hacked to suspend disbelief and believe that, though we are not interacting with real trees, rocks or animals, we are still benefiting from a totally imagined nature scenario. I now believe the possibilities for aesthetic appreciation are boundless. We want to create gardens of our imagination and, as David Hockney puts it, “a new nature”, one that invites viewers to see their surroundings in a fresh and exciting way. ■

Above:  
Rewilding an  
Earl’s Court  
development  
(2023) at  
Empress Place,  
London



# FUTURE INVESTMENTS

The National Youth Arts Trust was founded a decade ago to counter the damage caused by years of government cuts. Today, its mission (and challenges) are more critical than ever

by Fiona Laird

I like to think that most people reading this piece will already believe this, but I'm going to say it anyway: the arts are not a luxury for rich people. A talent for acting, singing, dancing or playing the cello has nothing to do with the state of your parents' bank balance. The love for, and appreciation of, the performing arts is shared by millions of people in this country, and the ability to buy a ticket for the theatre, a concert, a dance piece or an opera should not be curtailed by the size of a person's income. The more art people see, the more they want to see, and the more they want other people to see. Art nourishes, civilises, uplifts and inspires us.

I founded the National Youth Arts Trust (NYAT) in 2013 in response to the growing crisis in funding for performing arts education in the UK. After years of reduced government investment, it had become difficult, if not

impossible, for young people from non-privileged backgrounds to find access to any training in the performing arts. (At present, fewer than 30% of UK primary school pupils take part in any form of drama, music or dance.) The NYAT's aim was, and still is, to provide these young people with opportunities to train in dance, music and drama. The NYAT has now been in existence for 10 years and I am immensely proud of it. But the fight (and constant begging) to obtain the money needed to provide thousands of young people with opportunities they would otherwise be denied is only a part of the story.

Arts funding in this country is in serious trouble.

To see the big picture clearly, it's necessary to go back a few years. Up until 2008, the arts were booming: government investment in the sector had doubled since 1997 and private investment in the arts had reached record levels. In 2007, theatre attendance across the UK reached its highest point since record-keeping began, with around 13.5 million people attending the theatre that year.

Things began to change in September 2007, when a bank called Northern Rock suddenly faced a liquidity crisis and needed a loan from the British government – cue the first run on a British bank in 150 years. On 15 September that year, Wall Street investment bank Lehman Brothers filed for bankruptcy – you may have seen a play about it – and suddenly the entire world was engulfed in the biggest financial crisis in nearly a century.

Inevitably, the UK government in power at the time was held responsible and duly punished. Gordon Brown was unable to form a government following the 2010 election and, after a brief kerfuffle, a coalition government of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats was formed. Jeremy Hunt, while in opposition as the Shadow Culture Secretary, had been making friendly noises to the arts sector, and his May 2010 inaugural speech as the new Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport gave arts leaders some reason to hope that he might have meant what he said. At the time, Charles Saumarez Smith, then Secretary and Chief Executive of the Royal Academy of Arts, commented, “Given the disastrous state of the public finances, Jeremy Hunt’s strategy is sensible: reassure the arts community by heaping praise on the achievements of the last 10

years; lever in extra public funding by restoring the lottery to its original purposes; and then do everything that can be done to encourage private philanthropy.”

### Funding Failings

But as a certain Prince of Denmark might have expressed it, Hunt’s speech was clearly nothing more than “words, words, words” because, just one year later, his department oversaw a 29% cut in the government’s grant to Arts Council England (ACE). The National Theatre, the Royal Shakespeare Company and the English National Opera all suffered huge cuts to their funding, and some theatres and theatre companies lost their funding completely, as did – almost unbelievably given Hunt’s insistence on his commitment to increasing private funding for the arts – the one organisation that then existed to help arts organisations raise funds: Arts and Business.

And that was only the start. Since 2011, the arts sector has suffered cut after cut and little action has been taken to fill the void. A series of apparently indifferent secretaries of state at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) seem to have done nothing more than obey the Treasury’s bidding to find ever more savings in their budget. A spark of hope emerged when, during the Covid-19 pandemic, the government allotted £1.6bn to a Culture Recovery Fund, which prevented the collapse of the entire sector. It now seems that this was a lone – albeit generous – gesture. Nicholas Hytner, former Artistic Director of the National

**Fiona Laird** is a theatre director, writer and composer, and Founder of the National Youth Arts Trust





## “Since 2011, the arts sector has suffered cut after cut and little action has been taken to fill the void”

Theatre, wrote recently of his “despair at the bizarre decision to invest heavily in a fund to help the arts outlive Covid, only to starve them of the support they need to return to health”.

### Southern discomfort

And this is the crux of the matter: there has been no sign, for decades, of any coherent strategy to support the arts in this country, no rhetoric or policymaking emanating from the DCMS, Department for Education (DfE), or indeed No.10, that indicates any real belief in the power and value of the arts. In February 2022, then Culture Secretary Nadine Dorries instructed ACE to take £24m from London and distribute it elsewhere in England, which – to quote Hytner again – “was nowhere near enough to transform the picture in the rest of the country, but enough to devastate English National Opera”; later that year the Donmar Warehouse, Oldham Coliseum, Hampstead Theatre, the Watermill, and the Gate lost their ACE funding completely.

As if this weren’t bad enough, these cuts followed on a devastating 2021 announcement by then Education Secretary Gavin Williamson that the UK government subsidy to university arts courses would be reduced by nearly 50%, and would instead be funnelled into the science sector. Not only was this a blow to students across the nation and the future of the creative industries, but it created a simplistically dangerous argument that a society must choose

between the arts and science. For goodness’ sake. It’s like asking a person if they’d rather have a left or a right hemisphere in their brain – you can’t function without both.

But the lack of coherent arts policy is about much more than funding from the DCMS and the DfE. Where are the people creating imaginative and effective new policies that will reverse the current drop in the rate of charitable and philanthropic giving in this country? That will incentivise individuals and companies to support and sponsor the arts? That will encourage the belief that the arts are worth our time and money?

And, of course, investment in the arts is not simply about paying the costs of making the work. It’s about making it possible for anyone – everyone – to see it. The National Theatre uses a huge amount of its income to keep ticket prices as low as possible for everyone; any UK resident between the ages of 16 and 25 can book a ticket for £10 or under for any National Theatre show. Creating that opportunity is a serious expense. But what a vital investment it is.

Aristotle said, “the aim of art is to represent not the outward appearance of things, but their inward significance.” In the UK, as a country and a society, we are in desperate need of leaders who will do the same, and show us that, when it comes to the arts, they understand not just their cost, but their incalculable value to us all. ■



■ To learn more, visit  
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# HIDDEN CAPITAL

How do we rewire national and local systems to take better account of social, cultural and environmental value in our economy?

by Tom Stratton and Stephen Jones

**H**ow do we unleash the potential of UK cities?

This question sits at the heart of the UK Urban Futures Commission, led in partnership with Core Cities UK and others by the RSA. Previous answers to this question have tended to focus narrowly on economic measures of success: How do we make our cities more productive? How do we raise skill levels in cities? How do we improve connectivity and infrastructure in our cities? While all these issues are important to success, we wanted to take a broader approach through the Commission, one that also recognises the critical and often overlooked importance of social, cultural and environmental value.

This approach more accurately reflects how people think about the place they live, and not just those that reside in cities. When people choose to move house, the motivations and factors they look for are often social, cultural and environmental. Is it near to friends and family? Are there social and community groups to get involved in? What are the cultural and social amenities like? Is it close to green space and good-quality air?

Yet, when it comes to measuring and valuing these factors across and within places, we find it hard. Data on the quality of community infrastructure and social networks, on the cultural offer, or on the environmental performance of places is piecemeal. We therefore set about, through the Commission, to establish a regenerative framework for assessing the natural, social and economic assets of our cities and practical recommendations for rewiring national and local systems to properly account for this collective value.

## **Nested systems approach**

In order to understand how the systems of economic, social and natural capital interact, we need to be able to define what we mean by each of them. Economic capital is already well defined. We might usefully think of social capital as the stock of non-financial resources in society, among citizens and within communities. This includes endowments of trust, relationships, belonging and agency among people, together with the social infrastructure – including civic and community institutions – as well as cultural offerings that support these assets and collectively help to define ▶

**Tom Stratton** is Chief of Staff at the RSA. **Stephen Jones** is Director of Core Cities UK, the RSA's partner on the UK Urban Futures Commission

a place. This stock of social assets generates a flow of improved wellbeing among citizens.

Natural capital captures the stock of natural assets on the planet, from lakes and oceans to forests and soils, to animals and the biosphere. These assets are not easily quantified or given a market value, but can be given accounting or user values for the essential services they provide to sustain people, biodiversity and places.

The case for properly valuing and nurturing social and natural capital does not end with the importance of these systems individually. Economic, social and natural systems reinforce one another. The Commission repeatedly found that concentrations of low income, health deprivation and poor air quality cluster in deprived neighbourhoods across the UK's cities. Conversely, growth in one system is contingent on the health of the others, so these systems are best nurtured as a collective rather than in isolation.

### **Tackling underinvestment**

In order to build a system that properly values social and environmental capital, we need to understand why there is currently underinvestment at a local level. The impact of austerity in the last decade on local authority budgets has significantly reduced investment in social, cultural and environmental assets, as limited funding has increasingly been consumed by statutory service provision in areas such as adult and children's social care.

We also tend to see underinvestment in these assets from the private sector. This is due to it being difficult to capture revenue streams from these assets that make such investments profitable. Any monetary benefits that do exist tend to accrue indirectly, for example through increases in wages or savings in utility bills, which are difficult to capture at the project or local level. And many of the benefits cannot be monetised, accruing in the form of improved wellbeing or a better environment. This means it is not attractive for the private sector to invest beyond small-scale philanthropic projects aligned to their environmental, social and governance commitments.

These local issues are compounded at the national level by the UK's macroeconomic and fiscal framework, which fails to take proper account of social and natural capital. Returns on money spent in each of these areas are structurally undervalued, resulting in less investment capital being made available to spend

in cities to enhance communities or improve the natural environment.

So, what will it take to rewire the way the UK works to better account for social, cultural and environmental value?

### **Local prosperity plans**

The Commission recommends we start at the local level with a plan. Currently, it is rare for local authorities to cover economic, social and natural systems in a single strategy. If future efforts are to be more successful, this needs to change. What is required is a single, long-term integrated strategic plan to deliver prosperity to city residents and beyond through the regeneration of its economy, society and environment. We might call this a 'local prosperity plan'. This can ensure the benefits of replenishing non-financial and natural assets are not missed, even for those that are more comfortable with traditional economic measures of prosperity. Healthier and happy residents are likely to be more productive, while innovating to reach net zero provides opportunities to create secure, well-paid jobs as part of the transition.

Better management of non-financial and natural sources of value also necessitates better measurement, in particular those that aim to capture the happiness and wellbeing that people derive and the long-term, intergenerational benefits that accrue. This requires places to identify appropriate indicators of broad-based prosperity and understand their interdependencies. And this plan cannot be the preserve of a local politician or the local authority. In the case of cities at least, the most successful plans are designed and delivered collaboratively, drawing on a wide cross-section of partners with a stake in the place's success, such as businesses, anchor institutions and, crucially, residents themselves.

### **Lessons from Wales**

However, a local prosperity plan alone is not enough. Without systemic intervention, growing demands for statutory services combined with constrained budgets will continue to squeeze resources for investment in social and natural capital. Balancing against the gravitational pull of statutory services such as social care, waste and public safety means putting local authorities' responsibilities to grow prosperity in their city on an equal legislative footing. This new statutory responsibility might be framed explicitly as an

Artwork by  
**Michael Kirkham**  
for the RSA.  
Michael is a digital  
illustrator who  
lives and works in  
Edinburgh



enabling purpose – akin to that in the Well-being of Future Generations Act in Wales – that stipulates the long-term duty of places to serve both current and future generations’ social, economic and ecological needs.

The complement to a new statutory purpose focused on prosperity is increasing the funds available to invest in non-financial and natural forms of capital. Part of the answer lies in granting local leaders greater discretion over how to spend their money, including building their own capability to develop projects and invest wisely. The current plethora of short-term competitive bidding pots that are narrow in scope are anathema to leaders investing in a strategic and balanced manner across the three systems. A healthier approach might look like the mirror image: long-term, flexible funding settlements granted on a multi-year basis.

Ideally, as well as greater flexibility, increasing the size of the pot available to invest in social and natural capital would be part of the solution. While public finances are likely to remain tight, fiscal devolution would help. Broadening the range of taxes that are collected subnationally would allow places to realise some of the indirect returns on investment that accrue from well-executed local prosperity plans, which, in turn, could be reinvested or used to attract match funding from the private sector, creating a virtuous cycle.

Finally, shifting the system means revisiting the UK’s macroeconomic and fiscal framework. Current rules promote short-term decisions to balance the books rather than the long-term investments needed in social, natural and even economic capital. Adapting the UK government’s fiscal rules from a focus on declining net debt over a five-year horizon to maximising net wealth – defined broadly across social, economic and natural capital – over a longer-term horizon would be transformational. And, as with local prosperity plans at the subnational level, placing this broad definition of wealth at the heart of a clear long-term and integrated national industrial strategy would bring considerable benefits across all three of the nested systems.

Taken together, we believe that the recommendations in the Commission could unleash the potential within our cities and not only create economic powerhouses but vibrant, more equitable and sustainable places that can bring joy and wellbeing to many, both within cities and beyond. ■



**“Part of the answer lies in granting local leaders greater discretion over how to spend their money”**



Hooogar Collective 2023

# ROOM TO GROW

In the thriving art destination city of Guadalajara, Mexico, young members of the Hooogar Collective are pursuing an ambitious mission: to create community, nurture collaboration and make art accessible to all

by Jacaranda Ayala, Michelle Castellón and Maria José Téllez

Everything is always about community, and when it isn't, it's about the lack of it. In the middle of a global pandemic and with a longing for community, Hooogar emerged not simply as an underground art collective, but as a literal 'home' or a metaphysical parent for our young band of artists [*'hogar' is Spanish for 'home'* – Ed.]. We envisioned Hooogar as a collective that would yield something more profound than simply a consolidated art scene or external validation. We wanted to build a place where friendship and creativity could thrive and serve as guidelines for the professionalisation of each member's individual artistic practice.

We are based in Guadalajara, a vibrant and fast-growing city of over 5 million people in western Mexico. Here, you'll find busy streets, busy lives and a collective ethos based on a desire to erase limitations. Renowned artists and architects (Miguel Aldana, Luis Barrágan and Mathias Goeritz, to name just a few) have been drawn to this city for decades, leaving an indelible mark on its cultural history.

Hooogar was born in a house shared by art students which evolved into an informal hub for creating short films and videos, socialising, hosting parties, film nights and even flea markets. Eventually, a group of us began working together more intentionally towards the transformation of Hooogar into a collective dedicated to nurturing collaboration and supporting Guadalajara's artistic scene, which is known for its artist-run spaces.

But Hooogar's ambitious mission goes far beyond physical space: we aim to make art and

creativity accessible to all, regardless of financial constraints. At its core, we aspire to forge a space where artists can break free from the traditional boundaries of how art is presented – a place where experimentation thrives, where friendship is the guiding axis for survival and where the artistic process is celebrated as much as the final masterpiece.

We were inspired by other groups, such as Luis Galeria and Grupo Ascencio, both managed by three talented young artists in their 20s, who championed independent creators with their inclusive yet challenging curatorial approach. Over time, Hooogar's relationship with these groups has evolved into one of friendship and regular collaboration.

## Impact through exhibitions

We have always envisioned Hooogar's physical space, which has changed for almost every show, as an inclusive spot for contemporary culture, a stage for installations that challenge conventional norms of how spaces and objects are used and interact. Our installations are not just about showcasing art; they are about reimagining how art can be experienced. What's more, since we tend to work with the resources that are available to us at any given moment, many of our exhibitions are site-specific.

In our March 2023 exposition, *Esto No Es Guadalajara (This Is Not Guadalajara)*, we featured young artists from Mexico, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic and Colombia. Highlighting our commitment to diversity, the show explored themes of gender and race ▶

## “Our installations are not just about showcasing art; they are about reimagining how art can be experienced”

through a playful lens in hopes of sparking serious dialogue. Pieces like Marián Roma’s *Dust Licker* and Geraldine Riveras’ video *Lo absurdo que es calor* exemplify the kind of boundary-pushing art that Hooogar encourages, art that speaks to contemporary issues.

In April 2023, the showcase *En Memoria de Mario Barrosa* delved into the complex interplay between art, online communities and institutional critique. This installation ultimately developed into a collaborative curatorial project between the artist, Juan Diego Covarrubias, and Hooogar. In it, a traditional gallery space was transformed into cyber cubicles, inviting viewers to become users and inspire questions around the role of the audience in contemporary art, creating a space for both creation and dialogue.

Another exhibit, *Mi Casa Es Tu Casa*, stands out as a multidisciplinary exploration of art and domesticity. Mainly through the use of sensible objects, this work challenged the conventional notion of a home by inviting artists to redefine and reimagine what a living space can be. For the purposes of the exhibit, Hooogar transformed a completely in-use house into a gallery space, so that art became an integral part of the living experience. It raised questions about the traditional separation between art and life and blurred the lines between the private and the public, the personal and the shared, while creating dialogue between them.

### Jacaranda, Michelle and Maria José are members of the Hooogar Art Collective

Hooogar’s work is the product of the constant collaboration and horizontal participation of Jacaranda Ayala, Michelle Castillon, Brujo Chávez, Jimena Contreras, Gill Hersom, Mateo Miranda, Andrea Narváez, Eduardo Pérez, Esteban Ponce, Andrea Ramirez, José G. Rivera, Rebeca Rosas, Cristóbal Santiago, José Tajín, Maria José Téllez and Emiliano Ulloa. All are between ages 19 and 26 and currently evolving in diverse realms of artistic expression spanning visual arts, curation, design, cinema, music and fashion.

### Breaking barriers

Hooogar’s approach to art and culture resonates with the theory of object-oriented ontology (‘triple-o’), which posits that all ‘objects’, whether human-made or natural, have their own existence and agency and are not passive, but active, agents in shaping culture. Hooogar embodies this interconnectedness by fostering collaborations among artists and creators from various disciplines, recognising that art is not isolated from the world but is a vital part of the complex web of human experience.

Several of Hooogar’s projects beyond our installations work to bring this vision to life, breaking down barriers between artistic disciplines and exploring different forms of creative expression. Películas Tumbadas, for example, is a movie club and production house that works as a bridge to different art forms by hosting special screenings featuring directors and audiovisual creators. Mexicana de Indumentaria is a fashion initiative that curates designers from across Mexico in pop-up stores and makes an appearance at every Hooogar event with merchandise or special initiatives.

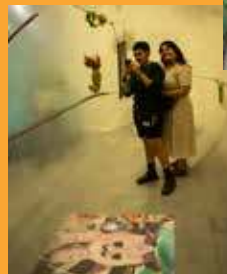
### Open spaces

We do not believe in exclusivity in the art world. Our space is open to everyone, regardless of their background or previous experience. This democratising approach has the power to transform how people perceive and engage with art, getting rid of the ‘intimidation factor’ and inviting everyone to participate in the conversation.

Hooogar’s vision for the future is not just about art, though. It’s about community, inclusivity and urban development: contemporary life, as we like to call it. It’s about creating a city where creativity knows no bounds, where collaboration is encouraged, and where art is for everyone. This has the potential to not only reshape the cultural landscape but also the very essence of the city itself.

We believe that art has the power to transform lives and cities. ■

■ Hooogar’s next exhibit will open at Guadalajara’s Art Weekend in February 2024 and feature artist Marián Roma, whose body of work explores the symbolisms and the ontology behind material ideas through different aesthetics. To learn more about Hooogar, visit [www.hooogar.com.mx](http://www.hooogar.com.mx)



### Hooogar Collective 2023



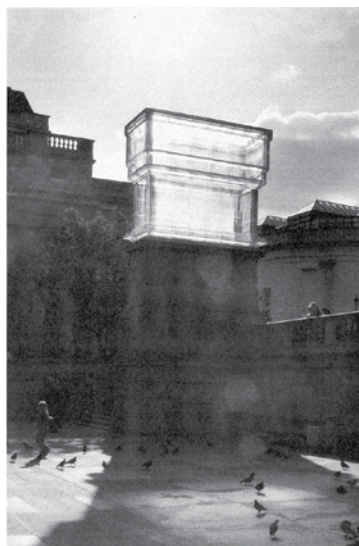
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## Trafalgar Square's fourth plinth stood empty for 158 years. In 1998, an RSA-led initiative set out to change that.



In the shadow of Nelson's Column in London's Trafalgar Square stands 'the Fourth Plinth', home to public art commissions (and lively debates on their relative merit) since 1999. But, for a staggering 150 years before that, the plinth stood empty. It wasn't until Prue Leith, in her role as Chair of the RSA, began a campaign to fill the vacant plinth that a project was designed to raise interest about art in civic spaces and resolve the plinth's long-term future.

Writing about the inception of the project in an April 2000 issue of *RSA Journal*, Leith recalled she thought it would be sensible to ask the public what they thought should fill the plinth, resulting in "hundreds of passionately argued suggestions", from Dolly the Sheep to Margaret Thatcher. The challenge, wrote Leith, was that "Trafalgar Square is so famous that no one can agree on what is appropriate."

Such was the strength of public feeling that the RSA set up a panel to shortlist the ideas. There was only one suggestion they were "almost unanimously enthusiastic about", wrote Leith – using the plinth for contemporary sculpture. A commissioning panel was duly created, and it

ultimately selected three proposals. The first to be erected was Mark Wallinger's *Ecce Homo*, a figure of Christ cast from a living body, hands bound behind his back.

Since the RSA handed responsibility for the project to the Greater London Authority in 2003, visitors to Trafalgar Square have had the opportunity to interact (whether they wish to or not) with many more thought-provoking works of art by British and international artists. From July 2020 to September 2022, the plinth was home to Heather Phillipson's *The End*, a giant dollop of whipped cream with toppings including a drone that filmed passersby and beamed the footage onto an internet livestream.

Currently on the plinth is artist Samson Kambalu's sculpture *Antelope*, a restaging of a 1914 photograph of Baptist preacher John Chilembwe, a hero of the Malawian independence movement.

It may have taken five years, multiple committees, proposals and complicated permissions to get the project going, but thanks to the RSA's initiative, the Fourth Plinth is now a space that regularly inspires creative debate about the purpose and value of public art. ■

Above left: *Ecce Homo*, by Mark Wallinger, became the first artwork to be erected on the plinth, in July 1999

Above middle: Cartoonist Jeremy Banks' take on Mark Wallinger's *Ecce Homo*

Above right: Rachel Whiteread's colossal artwork, *Monument*, installed in 2001

■ Scan below QR code to read The Fourth Plinth Programme Report (2000)



# YOUR BRAIN ON ART

The growing field of neuroarts explores the profound ways in which aesthetic experiences affect our bodies and behaviours

by Susan Magsamen

Science is now proving what artists have known for millennia – our brains and bodies are wired for art. Today, we stand on the verge of a cultural shift in which the arts can deliver potent and accessible proven health and wellbeing solutions to billions of people. And advances in technology have made it possible to look inside our heads and deepen our understanding of how the arts and aesthetic experiences affect us.

Such experiences hold significant importance when it comes to our mental health. Globally, nearly 1 billion people struggle with their mental health, with depression being a leading cause of disability. And a generation of adolescents and young adults is experiencing epidemic levels of mental stress. Accumulating evidence indicates that the arts are a powerful and potentially scalable way to foster youth mental health and wellbeing.

The International Arts + Mind (IAM) Lab at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine (Baltimore, Md) promotes innovation at the intersection of the arts and brain science, with the mission to amplify human potential across the lifespan through multidisciplinary research-to-practice efforts. IAM engages in research, leadership in the field, community building, and outreach and education. Through these endeavours, the Lab seeks to accelerate the

**Susan Magsamen, FRSA** is the Founder and Executive Director of the International Arts + Mind Lab, Center for Applied Neuroaesthetics, an initiative from the Pedersen Brain Science Institute of Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. She is also a Co-director of NeuroArts Blueprint

emerging field of neuroaesthetics, also known as neuroarts.

Simply defined, neuroarts is the study of how aesthetic experiences measurably change the body, brain and behaviour, and how the knowledge gained from our studies is translated into specific practices that advance health and wellbeing. For example, research has shown that engaging in an art project for as little as 45 minutes can reduce the levels of the stress hormone cortisol, and participating in just one art experience a month can extend one's life by 10 years.

Four core concepts underpin the neuroarts: neuroplasticity – the amazing ability of the brain to form and reorganise neuronal connections consistently and constantly, and to 'rewire' itself; enriched environments – surroundings that enliven our senses through colour, shape, smell, pattern, touch and sight can actually increase our brain mass (the ultimate enriched environment is nature); the aesthetic triad – a theoretical model created by scientist Anjan Chatterjee that depicts how our sensorimotor systems, our reward systems, and our knowledge and meaning-making all intersect to form aesthetic moments (moments of deep meaning in our lives); and the default mode network – that part of our brain



Images courtesy of Arts + Mind Lab





now believed to be the neurobiological basis of the self, the quiet, daydreaming, mindwandering, meaning-making place.

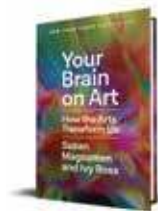
Arts interventions have been used to support the health of marginalised youth and developmentally diverse populations and, in general, they produce a wide range of positive outcomes. Yet, here in the US, evidence regarding the effectiveness of arts- and culture-based strategies has not led to shifts in standard youth mental health interventions and practices, responsive policies, or scalable solutions. There is a critical need for the research evidence to be translated into actionable practice and policy.

To begin to address this need, we are planning a project that will involve direct input from groups of young people aged 12 to 24 from six diverse communities across the US, focus groups, and a national survey, all with the aim of determining what arts and culture engagement strategies and programmes might be most effective in enhancing and maintaining youth mental health. We hope the results of our research will create trusted, community-based arts and culture programmes that advance the lives of young people by addressing mental health symptoms, reducing stigma, building self-concept and stress resilience, and improving overall wellbeing. We also look forward to scaling the project more

broadly across the US and into other countries.

To define a pathway for growing the field of neuroarts, the IAM Lab and the Aspen Institute's Health, Medicine & Society Program released the *NeuroArts Blueprint – Advancing the Science of Arts, Health, and Wellbeing* in 2021, a five-year initiative with a goal to ensure that the arts becomes part of mainstream medicine and public health. And, earlier this year, Ivy Ross (Vice President of Design for Hardware Products at Google) and I published *Your Brain on Art – How the Arts Transform Us*. The book is a compilation of interviews with over 100 people, including visits to labs, museums, theatres, art studios, community centres, kitchen tables and hospital rooms, illustrating how and why the arts and aesthetic experiences are imperative for our individual and collective health.

Our goal is to grow the neuroarts field into an immersive ecosystem that celebrates the highly interdisciplinary and collaborative nature of our work and provides virtual and physical spaces for all types of stakeholders, including artists, to share ideas and projects. ■

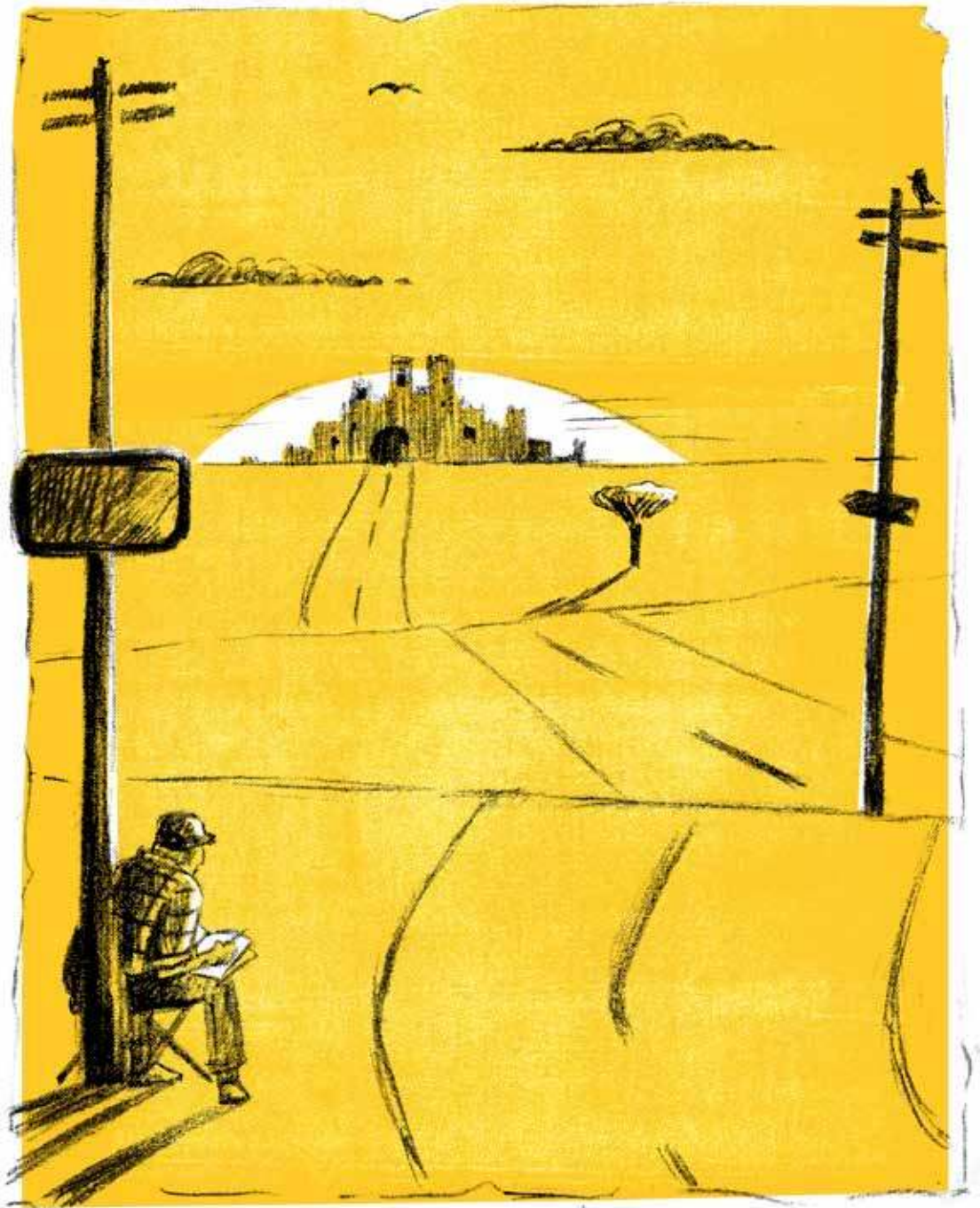


**New York Times Best Seller** *Your Brain on Art* (2023) was co-authored by Susan Magsamen and Ivy Ross



■ To learn more, visit: [www.artsandmindlab.org](http://www.artsandmindlab.org)

# PERSPECTIVE



Artwork by **Daniel Haskett** for the RSA. For the past 15 years, Daniel has been collecting, drawing and watching solitary figures, often from a rear view, as they contemplate the start of a new journey into unknown territories.

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