

TOGETHER WE ARE POWERFUL - A CASE STUDY

Giving up to gain - what does it take and what can we learn when we redistribute power?

This case study considers the co-produced programme [Together we are Powerful](#) at the Hub from the perspective of lead artist Kate Genever. My intention is to capture the learning of the project and enable its ongoing application at the Hub and within other organisations.

Two additional texts are offered as editorial. These pieces of creative writing could be considered as stand-alone pieces or read in collaboration with this document.

Commissioned by: The Hub, Sleaford.

Author: Lead artist Kate Genever

Completed: May 2024



“Together we are Powerful supported the Hub to elevate often small, nervous people, of all ages, to share something important. Something that changed their life. That’s history now!”¹

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Commissioner and Lead Artist

¹ All quotes throughout are drawn from conversations with staff, participants, artists commissioned, visitors or taken from the exhibitions comment book.

The Hub is home to a national centre for craft and design, its celebrated exhibitions showcase contemporary artists and makers from around the world. Their dynamic learning programme supports all people, ages and abilities to engage in creative activity.

Based in Sleaford, Lincolnshire, the Hub is an Arts Council England NPO, it is owned and supported by North Kesteven District Council and operated by Better, part of Greenwich Leisure Limited.

It welcomes 115,000 visitors a year.

The Hub opened at its current site in 2003, with a major capital redevelopment in 2020.

20 years is a milestone for any arts organisation. Let alone one that has survived a pandemic, the introduction of the competitive Arts Council funding awards and a merger with another regional arts organisation. Add its rural base and testing financial times and it's no wonder the Hub wanted to celebrate! There was a desire to revisit notable exhibitions and build on previous community focused work. Mostly though the Hub wanted to show their "*wider transformed local and national identity and purpose, which places culture, creativity & community at the Hubs heart*".

The team had an ambition to:

- Commission an artist/s to mark the 20 year celebration
- Create an offer that would improve cultural diversity
- Strengthen links with local audiences while also remaining relevant to national ones
- Engage their local community in programming
- Champion and drive forward debate on the significance of craft and design and celebrate the power of making in our lives.
- Try something new and seek collaboration with local partners and residents
- Make something happen between June to November 2023

www.hub-sleaford.org.uk

Kate Genever. Is a south Lincolnshire based artist with significant experience in supporting people, communities and organisations to reflect on or activate change using creative co-production approaches.

Her practice was known to several of the staff, having completed a community facing commission for the Hub in 2014 and through the curators research into work had undertaken for other national organisations.

Kate uses process-led principles and strengths-based approaches, often working in collaboration with artists, organisations, researchers and curators.

She has worked with organisations such as Yorkshire Sculpture Park, Lakeland Arts, Hull City Council, NHS/Public Health and Museum of English Rural life.

www.kategenever.com



“We are intrigued and curious about what we might get and who might be involved.”

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The challenge

The following questions were the starting point for this case study. They came from my reflection on the project as a whole and my ongoing practice in leading co-productions for national organisations.

- 1. What happens and what’s the experience when certain artists, with certain arts practices, lead, facilitate and support the co-design and reimagining of program within arts organisations?**
- 2. What happens when an organisation forges new relationships to redistribute their power and authentically co-produce a programme of work – what does it take and offer?**
- 3. Why process-led, coproduction opportunities can be the bedrock of meaningful meaning making for local communities and visitors alike?**

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The impacts

I am starting by sharing the most impactful results first. With project detail appearing later in the document. The headings respond directly to the challenges set out above.

Co-production

"The act of making/being involved can reconnect people with past, present and future experiences and emotions."

"Co-production is presenting back to your assertions and beliefs and makes you question what you think you know."

"This work helps us think about the relationship between responsibility, accountability and power. Kate retains responsibility while abandoning authorship. She is accountable and responsible, but still open to not knowing the answers and letting them emerge."

"This work has taken all our capacity and more, it has taken more budget than we planned and it has taken longer to do and more meetings than we would normally give. It has questioned how we plan, structure and organise. We have loved it, but we now really know what it takes and this is good for next time."

"What does adopting co-production approaches mean for communities, audience, visitors, the art, artists, the organisation and funding? I reckon anything that is for care, connection and community are the first acts for a new inclusive future."

"Co-production is messy and emergent rather than consistent or straightforward."

*"It's process led, which means it will have a sh*t middle part, you will be afraid you've done a terrible thing and then you will adapt and be creative. It takes courage"*

Power:

"The ideas and process at the heart of Together We are Powerful reverse the traditional way galleries work. Instead of the curator selecting and inviting people to look, instead the community asked the gallery to look at their things. This is its power."

"Learning ranges from the small to the huge. Small practical things like a display case in the café area giving a taste of the show upstairs sits alongside huge strategic learnings such as flattening hierarchies between curation, artist and institution and not holding the power so tightly."

"Trust – collapsing power is all about trust, in self and others. We should be creating spaces where trust is encouraged to thrive. Kate is an experienced artist, the community has great ideas – we just needed support to hold open a space for listening."

"You need total buy-in from senior leadership / board... it won't happen otherwise."

“Leaving space and adopting an open-ended approach to planning can provide opportunities for all to feel more in control and safe, whilst some facilitators/organisations/managers may find this unpredictability difficult to cope with.”

Artist as leader

“The whole project has challenged how we could work in the future. Why not bring artists in to work more strategically or at least reveal process led making - which is often hidden from view in the artist studio? This could become central and a visible breaking down of myths of how and what artists do.”

“Organisations can trust certain artists with certain practices to lead and this successful project proves it. To surrender power often seems like giving in, or up, but rather it could be seen as acceptance – acceptance that what has gone before has not worked or at least is limiting.”

Audience

“The project changes how we think about audiences. They are no longer audiences, they are like us – people and we need to work together.”

“The participatory element was not just - draw a picture - which often feels superficial. It was deeper and this enabled a meaning making with and from art to happen. The boundary between art and participation collapsed.”

“The sharing of co-produced work helps build confidence and recognition for those involved. It has the ability to grow peoples confidences which can lead to life lasting changes.”

“You have to abandon assumptions the general public can't be trusted to have good ideas - people are your greatest assets.”

“If you open the doors with a generous, honest and authentic offer people will meet you half way – if they don't they are not ready, but you can still invite them.”

Venue

“The space set up/gallery design signalled play and joining in”

Togethering

“By default we as an organisation make decisions, drive forward choices. This is clearly not always useful, People have enjoyed being involved, in fact they want to get involved. They have been generous.”

“This success means that people want us to repeat it. That would be terrible. This project is of this time, this artist, this community. We could work this way again but we now know a different thing would emerge – rightly.”

"I learnt years ago leadership is about followership – it's about creating the right environment that means people will feel empowered and come with you. It's about creating space for people to have ideas, it's about trust and fundamentally it's humble – it's about accepting you don't know everything and the best idea emerges from that soup of together.. this was the perfect soup!"

The Hub

"A thriving organisation, like a thriving artist's practice, is not the responsibility of one – it needs many."

"Process-led working, using limited materials, supports ambitions for sustainability and shows how limited resources can be utilised to make comment on that, but also model a way of working that is good to ask the organisation and others to reflect on."

The Hub should be credited with:

- *Trusting themselves to become authentic in delivering to their ambition to engage their community in programming.*
- *Taking a gamble by placing an artist and their practice in a leadership position. Standard practice is that the artist bends out of shape to fit the organisations – this role was reversed.*
- *Stepping into risk: not knowing what things would look like, what might happen, how to advertise and who would engage. Particularly given this way of working was not familiar to them.*
- *Having the courage to test and challenge their commitment to funders, guiding principles and prove that they are cutting edge.*
- *Maximising the teams under-utilised skill sets to develop confidences and experience*

"There's no I in together - it wasn't called I am powerful for a reason."

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Manifesto

The manifesto was created over the development phase of the project. It is a gathering of significant observations, reflections, feelings and important approaches. It became embodied as the works guiding principles

Together we are powerful is a provocation

Together we are powerful is a title

Together we are powerful is a co-produced approach – meaning it thinks about where power is located and then forges relationships to redistribute this.

Together we are powerful is interested in all voices and all types of culture.

Together we are powerful involves everyone's skills and supports people to learn new ones.

Together we are powerful is unique to Sleaford, because it is created by and for those who live and work here.

Together we are powerful invites local, regional, national and international connections

Together we are powerful involves brave people who welcome risk.

Sometime this feels vulnerable

Together we are powerful is deliberately patient. Taking time to listen, discuss, breathe, work with consent and in collaboration, stop, reflect, observe, catch and store energy.

Together we are powerful will mix art and wellbeing together.

Together we are powerful democratises the decision process of what goes in the galleries

Together we are powerful invests in the diversity of new and existing audiences and participants

Together we are powerful connects generations through stories

Together we are powerful is inclusive

Together we are powerful enables everyone to become an artist. Everywhere a venue

Together we are powerful knows the answers are in the room

Together we are powerful is for all faiths and none

Together we are powerful is generous

“The manifesto and its guiding principles, such as “we invest in the diversity of new and existing audiences and participants”, are now part of our way of being, our way of working going forward.”



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Kate Genever's approach to co-production

At our initial meeting the Hub staff team² expressed an interest in the work being 'co-produced' with the local community. I shared a text Dr Harriet Rowley and I had written.

What is co-production? It's an exciting way of working that broadens the opportunity for all people to have more equal access to how decisions get made and to have their say especially when current structures are limiting or limited. Importantly there is a distinction between democratisation of culture and cultural democracy. The first is about giving everyone access to the arts and all its benefits. The second is harder to define but is more than access, it's about giving everyone the chance to be part of (re)making and representing culture - this is obviously particularly important for miss/unrepresented marginalised groups. Co-production is often used to describe the former but we think it's got a contribution to make to the latter.

How can co-production start? It's a case of thinking about where the power is located and forging relationships to redistribute this. This is particularly important for high end arts organisations steeped in tradition. We are not even sure how much they are aware of all the overt and covert ways they exclude!

I was clear, I would only undertake the work if we agreed to the above. My challenge and the Hubs agreement created the foundation of everything we did. Significantly this way of working, from experience, is not typical of a commissioner/artists relationship. Many organisations want to work this way but never succeed.

Their ambition "*to engage with their local community better*" was the perfect first step.

"It's a challenge to our existing framework!"

² The team: Clare Edwards - Director, Marion Sander – program Manager, Lesley Farrell - Curator, Sarah Elliot – Learning, Lucy Lumb – Communities and Visual Arts Development Co-ordinator, Mark Bowery - Marketing

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It starts with connection.

It all began with an invitation that brought 12 people together around a large table, placed in the gallery, to enjoy a meal cooked by the Hub café team. During which I read a short extract from *The Comfort of Things* by Daniel Miller to catalyse conversation. A conversation in which we considered the magic of objects and stories they keep. We thought about lost, kept and collected things.



I invited people to consider what skills, assets, people, ideas, potentials we had and overlooked by considering the tables centre piece: [Commonware](#) – a ceramic artwork made up of rejected ceramic dishes salvaged from a potters bin. We also reflected on the possibility of collaboration, via a commissioned cake³, balanced on a specially created seesaw that meant guests had to work together to get pudding.

This meal, with its messages and metaphors, created not only the catalyst and the next steps but also importantly seeded a confidence in the Hub team⁴ to embrace the work's potential and proceed.

“We have to trust in the process, I see that now?”

The first meal was followed with two further meals. Each bringing in new people and new inputs. At each meal we shared emerging ideas, collectively fine-tuned decisions, confirmed offers and decided on program. We continued to ask ourselves “who was missing from the table” and if the project was ambitious enough? The ideas, approach and principles that grew during these “togethings” led to the creation of a working Manifesto with points added as we went. At meal 2 guests were invited to create a piece of ‘Commonware’. At meal 3 the feedback from the town's young people was shared. After these events it was agreed the Hub team and I would use our experience and capacity to timetable the programme. Everyone involved was credited.

³ Made my Hub staff member Faye Parker

⁴ At their request the Hub staff were treated as guests having no knowledge of the evenings format – they were equals among all.

"I was frightened. What we might get might not be good enough, what if people visit and see something that's not our usual quality? What if the gallery is empty? What if it's too busy? What if we can't manage what comes in?"



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What emerged.

Together we are powerful was the act.
 Objects and their stories, the theme.

The program elements emerged in response to these. They included:

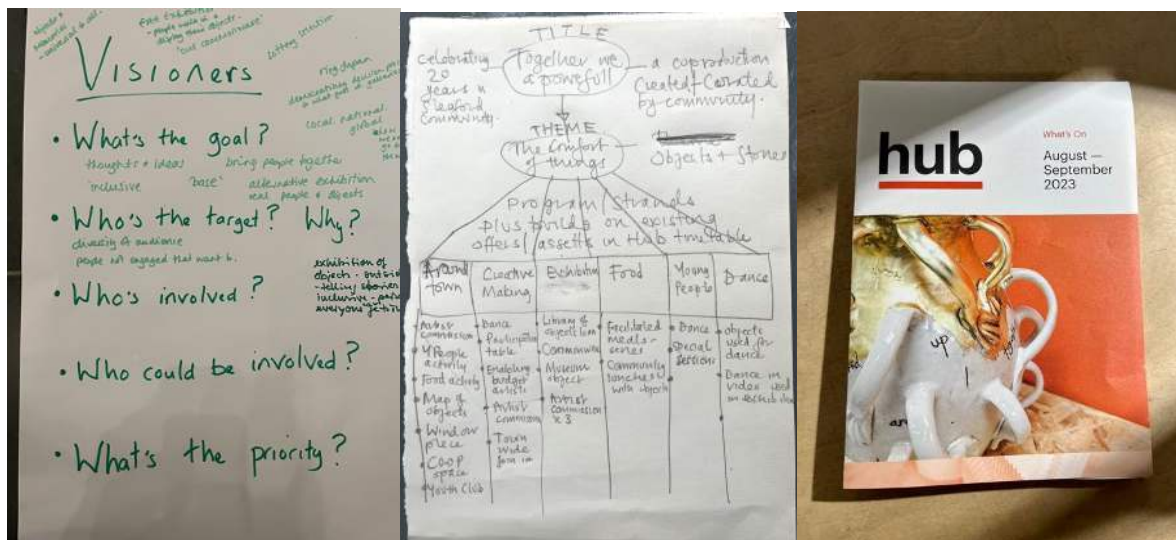
1. A series of dinners led by different people that use objects and stories as catalysts.
2. Objects and their stories loaned by residents and visitors and displayed in the gallery
3. Everything in programme to have a participatory element
4. Human library – people to share object stories to an audience
5. Making area where people can draw and make objects
6. Writer of stories in residence
7. Death Café - objects and grief
8. Young people create activity about objects that mattered to them
9. Important objects from Sleaford Museum loaned and displayed
10. Kate to make a sewn object and people invited to stitch
11. Reflections on what has been good about the hub and the objects its shown
12. Sessions of theatre, dance, talk, music led by specialists that are influenced by objects/stories

13. A postal project for people unable to access the Hub due to geography, age and mental health issues.
14. Budgets for people to make things to complement and add into for the show
15. Workshops and learning activity devised from ideas offered by community
16. Chippy Tea – with the potato as common denominator
17. Artist in residence programme based on the exquisite corpse
18. Postcard exercise used at meal 3 to be an activity in gallery
19. The Hubs existing regular sessions – young parents, book club etc would become part of the wider programme and have object focus
20. Activity in café and shop

Ideas that didn't make the programme included:

21. A telephone link to Japan to talk to someone about an object
22. 'Create kits' - boxes with materials and instructions to make an object
23. Window displays across town of favourite objects
24. Buying the old post office!

“Look at what we created! It's amazing, moving and good.”



“People have loved this show. It's been really engaging, and moving to see people get into it, and it's brought them back time and time again.”

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How it came to life.

The striking exhibition design was supported by Ashleigh Armitage. The gallery was divided into distinct areas and these hosted

Loaned objects and their stories displayed on a long low shelf, a series of plinths and the wall. Also included was a table for accessioning and writing stories. Across the five month period we temporarily accessioned over 100 objects from over 47 people. Some arrived at the start, others as the exhibition and idea took hold. The objects included childhood toys, a chopper bike, a quilt, a family bible, peg dolls, engineered models and ceramic pieces..... Each object was displayed with their distinct, often moving story attached.

Artist in residence area where visual artists developed works in response to each other and with limited materials. Related participatory activity happened here too. Six Local/ regional artists were commissioned: Bruce Asbestos, Laura Mabutt, Melody Phelan-Clark, Simon Hollingsworth [writer], Ruth Burrows and Jason Rungapadiachy [Musician] Simons Hollingworth⁵

Artworks with participatory elements including my "What's the story?" postcards and "Common Wear" scarves and sewing, and the earning hubs drawing, handling objects and votive charms.

Further activity happened in and amongst this including: meetings including a Contemporary Visual Arts Network East Midlands Steering Group Meeting, Hub dance events, tai chi, theatre [Rhubarb Theatre rehearsal and test showings], community meals [Danica Maier - artists' gathering, Richard Knight – Chippy Tea], music [Jason Rungapadiachy - playing in response to objects] talks with artists and object lenders, including representatives from Sleaford Islamic Centre talking about their objects significant to their faith.

The ground floor café, workshop and shop area hosted a death café, writer in residence research, skills based workshops, a singing group, poetry and a display case of selected *Commonware* pieces.

13,040 people visited and 2,452 people engaged in 31 events.

A final meal during the last week of the show brought together all the co-producers to celebrate and reflect. The writer in residence Simon Hollingsworth's read out his final text.⁶

⁵ The Artist in Residence programme was funded through Lincolnshire One Venues Communities fund supported by Esme Fairburn. Follow the link for more details on the artist involved:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1tnANBETOmVETvM7UWz_fRjbjxfln6vXp/view?usp=drive_link

⁶ Simons Hollingsworth final essay is 'further reading' below

“Random I love it!”





“Some wonderful unique items, all so different, yet special with meaning. I've found reading all the special memories quite emotional.”



“I loved how people’s ordinary things and their ways of making had been elevated. Originally when we started all this project, I was thinking that I wished most museum objects could go back to where they came, like Mummies etc. Which made me think I should document the objects that came in on loan as they really would go back.”



"Thought provoking as ever, but the story with the wooden train made me laugh out loud!"

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The legacy of Together we are Powerful

These observations come from the stakeholders listed. However there is also legacy in the people who participated and those who visited, who I have not interviewed.

The Hub

- The Manifesto continues to be used across curatorial and learning programmes
- Changing display of community loaned object in café area as a permanent legacy
- Utilising evidence gathered through data capture across lifetime of program, plus desire for further process led working, will form an approach ACE for funding uplift
- Hosting of CVAN East Midlands What's changing in Lincolnshire? Forum with this project as keynote.
- Confidence to lead a co-production and understanding of demands on capacity, funds and how to grow community relationships
- Young person's programming/curatorial group established
- Community programming team developing in relationship to RiverLight and other initiatives
- Staff review and mini re-structure
- More connected as a team? With skills set recognised and confidences grown
- Café staff and catering offer better utilised and now part of the wider programming team
- Stronger links with individuals and organisations in the town
- Together we are Powerful showcased by NKDC leaders at regional SO Festival Talks Programme

Kate Genever

- 'Togetherring' – as a noun! Used in ongoing work to describe coproduction
- Confidence to become Trustee at Absolutely Cultured, Hull
- Stronger connections to artists and organisations in area

Commissioned Artists

- "Making this work has completely changed my way of working, I'm so happy to have been part of the show. I took a risk and it's paid off."
- "I think I'm a producer not a writer, so to be asked was nerve wracking but also exciting, it allowed me to use a different part of my brain and be creative. I have loved doing this and being offered the opportunity. It has helped me understand what and how I ask artists to answer questions about what they are doing is often asked too early. How having to fix things too soon is not helpful or creative. I now see that to have openness to answer over time is useful."

- “I’m really happy to hold people in spaces of not knowing, so I got a taste of my own medicine. To have to be in risk is what I asked everyone in the process to do and I felt it completely, I’m glad.” Visitor comments
- “I have the confidence to go for Arts Council funding to try to continue this valuable work [Chippy Tea Artist]/

Wider

- Sleaford Museum redesign of displays to include personal stories
- Desire by funders to repeat this approach in the future and embed the ‘togethering’ approach to other initiatives
- Look at how the approach could help deliver a new cultural strategy for North Kesteven
- Explore how this work could be funded by other sources to lead to Together we are Powerful #2 (Art Fund Reimagine Grants)



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Resources

Programme copy

As we celebrate our 20th year, we're dedicating the whole summer season of 2023 to our collective ideas. Join us to explore the power we all hold in our community and how we bring this together for the greater good.

Co-produced by and with our local community, the exhibition includes a growing showcase of curiosities – lend us your objects, tell us their stories and be part of this unique celebration that brings everyone together to share and experience the stories that shape our community.

Through exhibitions, workshops, artists in residence, family activities, trails, readings, gatherings, events, talks, suppers, performances and more, visitors can expect the unexpected this summer. Join us for a season of curiosity & creativity!

Late last year artist, Kate Genever, was invited to facilitate a co-produced community programme for the Hub. This will mark the Hub's twentieth anniversary in 2023. The activity and title for this programme have been developed during a series of three meals with members of the Sleaford community and a session at Sleaford Youth Centre. The meals have also generated a future creative manifesto for the organisation, the idea of an exhibition featuring many elements and artists and a series of events.

Together We are Powerful is a co-production with individuals and groups from Sleaford and the wider area. To date those involved have included:

- voluntary group leaders
- young people
- youth leaders
- representatives from religious groups
- carers and those involved in social care
- artists
- regular visitors and workshop participants at the Hub
- artists
- community producers
- teachers
- Hub staff
- Museum staff

Further reading/research:

Daniel Miller: The Comfort of things

Artist in Residence programme – see [HERE](#)

A Co-production Model:



Taken from Culture Health and Wellbeing Alliance – but appropriate in this contexts: “[From Surviving to Thriving: Building a model for sustainable practice in creativity and mental health](#)”.

Two additional texts

Two reflections of Together We Are Powerful at the Hub, Sleaford.

I could tell of challenges and successes co-producing [Together we are Powerful](#) in 2023. I could tell of 20 years it honoured, the time it took, manifesto written, the artists commissioned, evocative objects loaned, stories told and the legacy created. I could list visitor numbers, participants and money spent, the learning and its impact. But rather I offer two texts, metaphors perhaps, providing alternative reflections

The first by lead artist Kate Genever and second from writer in residence Simon Hollingsworth.

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Commonwear/Commonware



Together we are Powerful began in earnest at a meal created for 12 guests⁷. I set the table, which had been placed in the middle of the gallery, with the centre-piece [Commonware](#) - a collection of rejected ceramic dishes salvaged from a potters bin that I'd glazed specially. Over the course of the evening I read out an extract from Daniel Millers book [The comfort of things](#). (Daniel is an ethnographer and the book recounts the living spaces of people from one street in London. He describes the objects kept and stories told. But more he looks and listen beyond all the surfaces to what is really being said, what meaning is really on display) I read a chapter about a Jamaican Windrush

⁷ The 12 included senior Hub staff, previously commissioned artists, regionally based producers, local residents,,,,

woman called Marcia, who kept multiple crucifixes on shelves next to holiday souvenirs and family photos.

Over the coming months I continued to rescue the abandoned pots while also collecting silk scarves. I asked friends for their now unused ones, I bought others in charity shops and Ebay. I invited people involved in the project to donate. With them I made a giant patch work [Commonwear](#). I installed it in the main gallery for the exhibition opening. And from then on people gifted me both their scarves and their scarf stories which we annotated and pinned to a cushion. The piece grew as the show progressed.

I, like Daniel Miller, believe in seeing everyday things as extra-ordinarily representative of lives, loss, love, longing – things we often can't speak of or put words to. He's working to strict anthropological principles I am being inspired by them. Together We Are Powerful, like all my work, pays ruthless attention to that and those who are considered common and ordinary. I know that it is in the questioning⁸ of the habitual, the overlooked, underserved and ill-considered we see and learn what we are. I try to track down what's missed when traditional notions of significance are applied⁹. Because here I know is the gold that will shake us from passivity, presumption and astonish.

And so I questioned the pots, made perhaps on a weekend course and discarded, relegated to the crocs bin, considered inelegant and uneven. I questioned too the out of fashion headscarves, pushed to the back of a draw, sent to the charity, too large, small, too colourful, too ugly. I questioned their fecund meanings, their histories, their construction, their past and present, their seemingly unworthy too muchness. I questioned them repeatedly while I saved and salvaged. I questioned their design, their surface, their age, and maker – had they been hoping for more, were they disappointed, had they struggled, made too many slinging aside the spares. Were they elegant, did their mother wear a scarf, had the colour been her favourite. I questioned whether they were printed or squeezed round a thumb. I questioned if they were meant as a gift, purchased to remember, stored for secret fantasies. I questioned the neck, the hand, the curlers they'd cupped, the imagination. I questioned the Sunday afternoon tea, the top down drive through the country, the ladle of soup, the salt.. And finally I questioned the person who had cast them aside, adult or child. And I wondered if they'd been afforded more time, like me, would they too have seen the power of this intimate focus?

Kate Genever. 2024

⁸ George Perec Approaches to What? 1973. "... Question that which seems to have ceased to forever astonish us. Question your teaspoons... It matters a lot that they should seem trivial and futile, that's exactly what makes them essential, if not more so.."

⁹ Editors introduction. George Perec. In Species of spaces and other pieces. 1997. Penguin pp 205-7

The Hidden Emotions of a Bread Board



Photo credit Simon Hollingsworth

How can an inanimate object mean absolutely nothing to one person but for another hold memories strong enough to illicit tears? The 'Together We Are Powerful' exhibition at The Hub has been an extraordinary experiment in celebrating memory and our relationship with 'things'. Reading the stories that people have submitted with their items is a profound experience – a tiny but fascinating insight into other people's lives and to a set of short stories that are imbued with meaning, significance and truth.

My relationship to this exhibition started with a bread board. A simple and in many ways unremarkable bread board, though one that has a space for the bread knife to be slotted in, which you have to admit is pretty cool. The object had been languishing in a cupboard at my recently departed father's house and as I began to go through all the things in the house that had belonged to him and my mother (who had died a year earlier), I began to develop a practical approach to whether to 'keep, chuck or pass on'. Anyone who has done this task will probably be familiar with the need to try to make at least some quick, pragmatic decisions. I was doing well and building up different piles for the tip, the charity shop, other members of the family, my own house etc, until I opened a corner cupboard and reached into the back and pulled out a flat piece of wood with a knife slotted into one side.

The reaction of suddenly seeing this forgotten object from my childhood in my hand was almost physical. A wave of joy and sadness hit me like a train. I was instantly transported to caravan holidays in Wales, to Saturday morning breakfasts in my pyjamas and to Sunday teatimes in front of the Holiday programme. I was astonished to be suddenly feeling so vividly the emotions

of being ten years old and was amazed that my brain was able to give me so immediate and so perfect a snapshot of moments from my life that I had apparently completely forgotten.

During my 4-day artist residency at The Hub in August and September, I spoke to around 70 different people in and around the building – mostly in the café – about favourite memories, about special objects, about people, family and friends and about the act of remembering itself. It was a fascinating experience and actually quite a privilege to feel as though I had permission to approach anyone and start asking them questions about their lives and their memories. Sometimes people chose to find an image in amongst the varied selection of postcards in the exhibition that might spark a memory or a connection and other times we just chatted....

I spoke to Debbie who had lived in Namibia and Botswana and worked in technology all her life and who regularly comes to The Hub (but didn't realise you could go upstairs and see exhibitions)

I met Paula who chose a slightly alarming image of human feet in a jar, but happily the memories it brought to mind were to do with seeing fruit in Kilmer jars as a child, not feet!

I had great fun with participants from Chapel Day Centre in Spalding who come to the Hub once a month for a movement session, but we looked at the exhibition instead and they made some fantastic, funny drawings

Richard & Jean got together just before Covid (they actually met in Costa Rica) having both just lost their long-term partners. They talked about life before and after losing their partners and the difficulties of managing family and friends from either side

I met three local secondary school English teachers, Astrid, Nina & Kylie who had gathered on GCSE results day to share a prosecco. One of them wrote a beautiful and evocative piece about memories of reluctantly visiting churches as a child with her mother and now doing the same with *her* daughter

David remembered moving out of London after the war and vividly recalled walking through buttercup fields and getting golden pollen on his shoes

John and Rose shared their memories of holidays in Scarborough and a first Knickerbocker Glory!

Carol told me her memories of drinking milk at school that used to be put on the stove when it arrived, so that by the time she was allowed to drink it, it would taste horrible

And I had a fascinating and moving conversation with Pam whose husband had had dementia and who had recently died and we talked about the act of remembering which for her had itself become an emotionally charged and complex process

This is a tiny taste of some of the conversations that I had and, since the exhibition opened in July 2023, hundreds of people have written down their memories, their thoughts – in effect their own short stories and, depending on where and when you are seeing this, I would urge you to go and have a read!

The opportunity to speak to so many people I did not know and who I simply would not otherwise have spoken to, had it not been for this project and this exhibition, was an absolute privilege and quite a profound experience.

Every object or image that was the starting point for one of these conversations and every object that was chosen to be included in the exhibition itself was just a thing, an inanimate object. Without the stories and the context from the person, they would appear random and almost certainly mean nothing to anyone else. But it's the stories, the human contextualisation that turns these things into such hugely significant conduits for emotion and reveal so much about our lives, our memories and our connections.

My parent's bread board is just a piece of wood (albeit quite a cool one with the whole knife slot thing... sorry to go on about it) but to me it is so much more than that, it's a portal to childhood memories and has become one of my most treasured possessions.

Things are indeed just things, but people are amazing and people make things amazing because of the stories they tell. Sharing our stories can be enlightening and empowering as well as deeply moving and occasionally absolutely hilarious. This exhibition and this experience has left me in no doubt that together, we are indeed powerful.

Simon Hollingworth.
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