

Reflections from the Canvas(s) Project

# Can vas (s)

A Creative Enquiry into Rights, Access and Cultural Spaces      Ali Eisa and Lucy Keany  
Autograph ABP, 2017

# FOREWORD

This document reflects on the key approaches and findings, which emerged from Canvas(s), a year- long project supported by Paul Hamlyn Foundation, exploring access to cultural spaces with young people from refugee backgrounds and a consortium of partners: Autograph ABP, Migrants' Rights Network, Asylum Aid, the British Red Cross, Counterpoints Arts and the National Gallery.

It was a challenging and often surprising process, initiating complex discussions, new methods and valuable learning. Although, we did not reach concrete conclusions we did discover more about how access issues could be approached differently when applying a 'rights' led approach to identifying and responding to barriers, devising ways of engaging, and introducing processes of change within cultural institutions.

We hope this document will inspire institutions to generate new discussions and methods for addressing access issues within their organisations. And where Canvas(s) focused on work with young people from refugee backgrounds, we hope our reflections can contribute more widely to conversations and practices advocating for the representation of marginalised communities at the centre of public, cultural life.



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# 1

## PROJECT DESIGN

### The Canvas(s) Project

Canvas(s) ran from May 2016 to July 2017, exploring access to cultural spaces with young people from refugee backgrounds. Funded by a Paul Hamlyn Foundation Explore and Test grant and managed by Autograph ABP, the project was formed around a diverse consortium of arts and migrants' rights organisations.

#### Why did we initiate the project?

Canvas(s) set out to explore the following question:

'Could a partnership of small organisations and independent practitioners, sharing a common concern with upholding and defending human rights, develop new insights and methods to improve access for young people from refugee backgrounds at a large cultural institution?'

Project partners included arts organisations and NGO's, chosen for their varied experience in rights-focused approaches to creative programming, arts participation and advocacy/campaigning initiatives. Each organisation has a long and successful history in developing and providing accessible opportunities to marginalised or under-represented communities.

#### Who were the partners?

**Autograph ABP** is a photography organisation exploring representation, cultural identity and human rights through exhibitions, events and publishing. **Migrants' Rights Network** is an established campaigning and policy organisation supporting and promoting the rights of migrants in the United Kingdom. **Counterpoints Arts** supports and produces arts projects by and about migrants and refugees. The **British Red Cross Refugee Service** assists asylum seekers and refugees to access essential services and adapt to life in the UK. **Asylum Aid** provide free legal representation and advocacy for those seeking asylum. **Chloe Osborne** is a freelance arts practitioner with extensive experience in producing inclusive participatory engagements with a focus on social change. **Gail Babb** works as Producer for Participation and Learning at Talawa Theatre, the UK's primary Black-led theatre company.

The focus of our exploration was the UK's foremost museum of Western European Art, The National Gallery. We were attracted by the cultural specificity and tradition represented by this institution and the challenge it has in demonstrating that it is relevant to the lives of diverse young people.

## **Who were the young people?**

Canvas(s) worked with a group of 14 young people aged 17 – 19 from Eritrea, Ethiopia and Sudan, who had recently claimed asylum in the UK and were going through the asylum process. Arriving as unaccompanied children, they were living in foster care or assisted accommodation based in Kent. They faced multiple social, cultural, legal and economic barriers impacting their ability to participate fully in day-to-day life.

Given the complex barriers asylum seekers face, we worked with the British Red Cross Young Refugee Advocacy Project (Kent) to recruit and form the group. This enabled participants to learn about the project and how to become involved through an experienced and trusted support worker (Robert Lloyd).

We chose to work with young people from refugee backgrounds due to the wide-ranging access barriers they face, and felt we would be challenged to learn more working with one of the least represented constituencies in cultural institutions.

(For more information please see 'Newly Arrived Unaccompanied Children and Young People', page 35 and 'Considerations when Working with Young People from Refugee Backgrounds', page 36)

## **Why did we call it a creative enquiry?**

'Creative enquiry' captures the ethos and process we applied to this collaborative project.

The starting point for partners with participants was to suggest that 'your [young people's] voices are missing' in cultural spaces and as a public resource it is your right to access them.

Through creative enquiry our aim was to explore and test how the unique rights-focused and advocacy skill-set of partners could be shared and applied to support a process of change at the National Gallery, an institution facing challenges in diversifying audiences. Could the knowledge and expertise of the consortium be transferred to tackle access issues? What 'agency' could a group of young people from refugee backgrounds effect at the heart of a cultural institution? What change could they encourage?

Placing the participants' voices at the centre required us to adopt an open and responsive approach that avoided predetermined structures or assumptions. It was an iterative process, requiring us to generate methods and activities week-by-



week. We enquired and tested, sometimes succeeded and sometimes failed, and in doing so generated new ways of working, thinking, and discovered more about how 'rights' can provide an opportunity to view access differently.

(For more detail please see 'Facilitating a Creative Enquiry', page 22)

## What did we do?

Canvas(s) began with a series of trust building and team building workshops held at Autograph ABP and the National Gallery, to introduce the project to the young people and gauge interest. This was a crucial part of the process to learn more about them and to set the initial direction for the facilitated sessions.

Given the participants lack of experience of cultural venues in the U.K, partners first devised a series of sessions exploring and responding to a range of spaces across London. Together we visited the Southbank, the Black Cultural Archives and Brixton market. The young people were also invited to plan their own 'cultural tour', and after some investigation they chose the Royal Observatory and Greenwich Market as the focus. At each of these locations we conducted research by interviewing staff and visitors, compared the different environments and collections, and met artists who gave us insights into their creative process.



We initiated a mentoring process through which participants told us how they felt about the project. It enabled us to create individual plans for funded educational training (of their choosing) to help them each work towards achieving their future aspirations.

We also asked the young people to create and produce a pilot event at Autograph ABP in the newly built education studio. They had 4 weeks in which to respond to a brief and a budget of £1000. They organised a party for friends, extending the invitation to all gallery visitors, and shared Eritrean food, games, music and photographic self-portraits.

This pilot informed the project's major outcome, a 'commission' to create a change at the National Gallery using a budget of £3000. During a series of workshops led by partners and artists, participants identified areas in which they felt the gallery could be made more accessible to diverse young audiences. Their key observation was to suggest making the gallery more interactive by using more audiovisual approaches to

the collection. An encounter with Henri Rousseau's iconic painting *Surprised!* (1891) had poignant relevance to their personal lives and cultural heritage. The depiction of the jungle conjured up Calais, and the tiger, rain-storm and foliage reminded them of home. Working with a poet and a musician, they chose to develop an audio trail that takes visitors on an immersive and personal journey through the galleries leading to the painting.



## Where are we now?

The project concluded with a test-run of the audio trail during a Saturday afternoon in summer 2017. The young people placed themselves at the centre of the galleries, inviting the public to take part and leave feedback. Over one hundred people explored the trail, experiencing the gallery environment and paintings in new and distinct ways. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive:

“This audio trail has enabled me to feel an emotional connection, especially considering my disability, I was able to experience the museum in a unique way...”

“I have worked at the National Gallery for two years and this is the first time I felt like I could relate my background to some of the most famous paintings and that because of the poems and sounds in this audio tour, it's amazing, well done!”

The young people also described some of the impacts as a result of being part of the project:

“Before I wouldn't talk with people, I was a shy man. But now I feel really confident... I really like it.”

Abraham

“We feel different, we've got confidence. Even our English, when we started from the first time to the end. It's such a big difference. We're gonna miss it.”

Simon, Biniam & Sammy

The test trail was a success, the public responded with enthusiasm and the young people felt a sense of ownership and belonging. Transforming the pilot project into a permanent audio guide at the National Gallery remains uncertain. At the time of writing it is still being discussed internally by the gallery. Meanwhile the consortium continue an ongoing advocacy process to share this demonstration

project (both at institutional and sector level) in order to influence a wider group of decision-makers to reflect upon approaches to access issues, which would enable marginalised and under-represented voices to participate in cultural life.

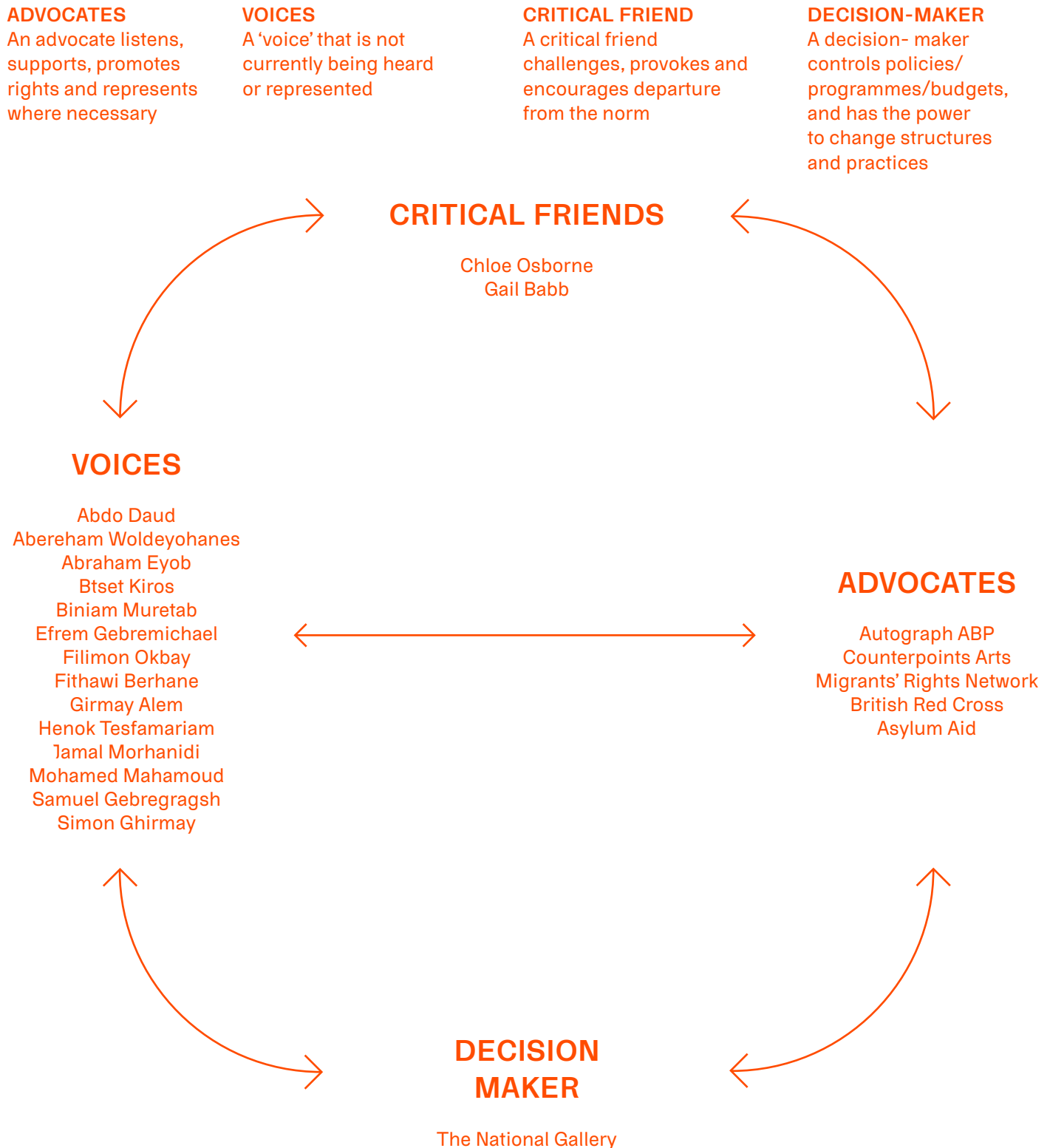
The following pages of this section outline in more detail the contributors who became the Canvas(s) Team, the roles they played and the key ideas, which shaped the project's ethos.





# Team Canvas(s)

The Canvas(s) Team included a diverse set of contributors: the following diagram describes these relationships through the language, roles and responsibilities of rights.



## ADVOCATES

**An advocate listens, supports, promotes rights and represents where necessary**

Advocates steered the creative enquiry.

As a consortium they brought together a diverse mix of rights-focused approaches and creative expertise to drive discussions and generate new ideas.

Advocates worked collectively through regular planning and development meetings to challenge, reflect and learn from one another. They adopted an iterative process, developing methods and activities on a weekly basis, which were driven by participant experiences and needs. This flexible approach enabled advocates to support and promote the rights of participants more effectively.

Advocates kept asking crucial questions about how the project could encourage change. How could rights-focused approaches shed new light on access issues and provide new solutions? How could they develop processes and methods to bring about this change? As a group of smaller organisations, who can act quickly and flexibly, how could they use this advantage to influence change in a large one?

Advocates:

- Listened through a series of mentoring sessions with the young people
- Designed accessible engagement sessions and invited artists to lead sessions
- Provided practical support for the young people such as remuneration and travel costs
- Developed an advocacy process with the National Gallery to help initiate the young people's proposal

## VOICES

**A 'voice' that is not currently being heard or represented**

The Voices were a group of 14 young people from refugee backgrounds, who showed us how arts access issues affected them.

Given the economic, social and emotional barriers they faced, beginner level language skills and geographic isolation from cultural experiences, participants had a unique perspective on public cultural spaces, fundamentally beyond the Advocates' previous experiences of working with marginalised constituents. The young people had no experience whatsoever of western cultural institutions, their offer, purpose or value. This prompted Advocates to challenge their own assumptions about what an access issue might actually involve. It sparked a creative process to develop and test inclusive facilitation methods as

a means of learning about the complex nature of access issues.

As contributors to the enquiry the young people were offered payment and tailored education options, as well as language-development, confidence-building and new friendship opportunities. The objective was to reduce some of the over arching social and economic barriers they faced.

The enquiry asked them:

- To share insight
- To be ‘agents’ in a cultural space
- To reflect on how participation in the project could benefit their day-to-day lives

Voices:

- Met every Saturday for a 3 hour facilitated session in London
- Researched cultural spaces
- Proposed a creative approach to changing access opportunities at the National Gallery

### **CRITICAL FRIEND**

**A critical friend challenges, provokes and encourages departure from the norm**

The Critical Friends were invited by the Advocates to provide a constructive critical forum.

As independent actors, unaligned to any organisation they served the agenda of the creative enquiry itself. They encouraged

Advocates to join up their rights-focused skill-set, break away from default delivery methods and to foster new collaborative approaches. The Critical Friends were chosen for their experience in long-term engagement projects with young people, performance backgrounds (not represented in the group of Advocates) and wide-ranging facilitation skills.

Critical Friends:

- Attended all the project planning / development and review meetings
- Led and observed some of the facilitated sessions with the young people
- Consulted on project design

### **DECISION-MAKER**

**A decision-maker controls policies / programmes / budgets, and has the power to change structures and practices**

The Decision-Maker, the National Gallery, is a large cultural institution facing challenges in diversifying its audience.

It acted as the test site for developing new approaches to access. The Advocates, Voices and Critical Friends worked together to try and influence the Decision-Maker, identifying a change pathway and implementing it.

To be part of the project the Decision-Maker needed to be an institution which was open to listening and willing to evolve.

The Advocates worked with the Decision-Maker on introducing an internal advocacy process to support the proposal for change.

Through being part of this process, the Decision-Maker had an opportunity to learn more about access issues relating to its venue; both through what was reflected back by the young people but also what the advocacy process uncovered in terms of any structural barriers within the organisation itself.

#### Decision-Maker:

- Attended meetings with the Advocates and all the facilitated sessions with the young people held in its venue
- Commissioned participants to propose a change at the National Gallery
- Worked with Advocates on developing an advocacy process to initiate change
- Reflected on how access issues can be addressed more widely within the institution





# Canvas(s) Ethos

The project success rested on three connecting elements:

- To be meaningful, relevant and provide learning opportunities for participants
- To foster and trial new collaborative and engagement approaches among the partners
- To encourage change at the National Gallery

This diagram illustrates the different approaches and ideas that formed the Canvas(s) ethos and helped frame the enquiry.

## EXPLORE & TEST

- Be adventurous and try new things
- Expect some confusion, indecision and wasted time
- Accept that not all experiments will end in success

## COLLABORATION

- Bring together diverse skills
- Use differences to challenge and advance the work
- Expect and embrace change

## CREATIVE ENQUIRY

- Set the agenda and questions
- Agree that the work should be process-led
- Make space to develop outputs and outcomes (iterative rather than pre-determined)

## RIGHTS-FOCUSED

- Participants have cultural rights
- Participants are entitled to assert their cultural rights
- Participants are entitled to hold cultural institutions accountable

## RELECTION

- Stay honest and critical
- Assess, reflect and review, and keep repeating all the way through
- Be willing to be uncomfortable with what you discover

## 2

# REFLECTIONS AND LEARNING

## Rights, Access And Change

In the following section we reflect on some key experiences and learning that came out of Canvas(s). The project created both positive outcomes for participants and also highly valuable learning for the partner organisations, contributing towards a process of change for all those involved. However the nature of the creative enquiry meant that we didn't know how each phase would develop, and this meant unexpected challenges would appear (and sometimes re-appear).

The Advocates' had to debate these dilemmas, pooling our perspectives to a common pathway through the challenges. We didn't always succeed! On completion of the project some tensions were still unresolved, however the discomfort found in questioning, probing and changing kept the creative enquiry alive and relevant to participants.

In sharing these reflections we hope to give the reader an idea of how we came to query, understand and develop approaches to access, rights and cultural spaces.

### 1. Rights-focused approach

The Canvas(s) enquiry centred on exploring rights-focused approaches to addressing arts access issues. We had to debate and define what constituted a rights-focused approach within this context and our task was to draw on the shared knowledge of the consortium to develop working methods.

One of the main purposes of the project was to encourage a change at the National Gallery relevant to young people, which was not simply reliant on providing a short-term cultural experience for them. We debated what having a 'voice' means, within such an institution, and how it can relate to agency-building, influence, action and change. The relationship between the Advocate, Voice, Critical Friend and Decision-Maker became the basis for a method that tried to listen, represent and implement the interests of participants.

The language of rights provided Advocates with a way of talking about and exploring a process of change. When we began to frame the dynamic between audience and institution into rights-holder and duty-bearer we also started to frame responsibilities differently. What emerged was a shift in focus to the wider institutional and structural issues that hinder access, and away from the individual being 'hard to reach'.

Rights-focused approaches, cropped up in how we discussed ethics in relation to participant recruitment or project design; in our attitude towards the young people; in the way we designed facilitated sessions; and in how we developed an advocacy plan to see if this would help our agenda for change at the National Gallery. What drove all of these approaches was the belief that everyone, at all times, has the right to access cultural spaces in a way which makes sense to their lives.

Advocates agreed that one of the biggest potential failures of the enquiry would be if it concluded with a token gesture in the institution. How could we justify the time and money if there was no evidence of a move towards change? Quite late in the project we realised we had to expand our rights-focused approach to include an advocacy process. We mapped National Gallery gate-keepers, identified the people we wanted to influence, learned about their lines of accountability and the institutional hierarchy. We discussed

lots of options for communicating with National Gallery staff in the lead-up to the young people's intervention; and learned that because of the scale of the institution and the speed of change, this process could have run on for longer.

The result of adopting rights-focused approaches meant we gained more insight into how closely access issues are interrelated at the individual, organisational and structural level. Although the task to address these access issues is highly complex, finding a way to re-imagine pathways to arts participation becomes vital when implementing a rights-focused approach. The consortium identified a need for arts organisations to take a more holistic and longer-term view: investing time in understanding the access needs of target constituents more thoroughly and drawing on sector expertise and practice both in and beyond the arts to meet these needs more precisely.

## Rights-Based Development

Rights-based development begins with the idea that all people are entitled to a certain standard of living spanning their civil, political, social, economic, and cultural life. The framework is built around the twin poles of rights-holders and duty-bearers, recognising that people are not beneficiaries but entitled citizens able to hold providers to account. This model works to strengthen the capacity of duty-bearers to be active in thinking through their obligations and for rights-holders to develop 'agency' through taking responsibility to exercise their rights.

In Canvas(s) the rights-holders were participants and the duty-bearer was the National Gallery.

This table illustrates a spectrum of difference across a charity, needs and a rights-based approach:

CHARITY APPROACH	NEEDS APPROACH	RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH
Focus on input not outcome	Focus on input and outcome	Focus on process and outcome
Emphasizes increasing charity	Emphasizes meeting needs	Emphasizes realizing rights
Recognizes moral responsibility of rich towards poor	Recognizes needs as valid claims	Recognizes individual and group rights as claims toward legal and moral duty-bearers
Individuals are seen as victims	Individuals are objects of development interventions	Individuals and groups are empowered to claim their rights
Individuals deserve assistance	Individuals deserve assistance	Individuals are entitled to assistance
Focuses on manifestation of problems	Focuses on immediate causes of problems	Focuses on structural causes and their manifestations

Source: Applying a Rights Based Approach, An Inspirational Guide for Civil Society, The Danish Institute for Human Rights, 2007

[www.humanrights.dk/sites/humanrights.dk/files/media/dokumenter/udgivelser/applying-a-rights-based-approach-2007-an-inspirational-guide-for-civil-society.pdf](http://www.humanrights.dk/sites/humanrights.dk/files/media/dokumenter/udgivelser/applying-a-rights-based-approach-2007-an-inspirational-guide-for-civil-society.pdf)



## 2. Right Group Wrong Group?

Initially Canvas(s) was conceived for a group of settled young people from refugee backgrounds who were interested in cultural participation or the prospect of a cultural profession. In our minds 'settled' meant they would be competent in English, legally able to work and resident in London for a few years or more. We also hoped for gender balance and mix of ethnicities across the group.

The reality was the group we were able to recruit after a prolonged process (via the British Red Cross Refugee Service) were none of these things. The majority were Asylum Seekers facing far greater restrictions than refugees. All lived in Kent, were complete beginners at English and had no experience of cultural spaces in the UK. Where we had hoped to attract a diverse group, all were male (except one) and they had mainly arrived from Eritrea.

We had to decide whether to continue with this group or start afresh. We questioned how ethical it would be to stop engaging a group we've already started to build a relationship with and who had showed enthusiasm. But we also wondered if a group like this would stay engaged for 6 months. Would they really have the motivation, skills and confidence to travel from Kent every Saturday?

We decided to continue, acknowledging that if we defined these young people as too 'complex' for our project we would be perpetuating the very access barriers we hoped to overcome. The reality was the participants forming the group represented the current

(For more information please see 'Newly Arrived Unaccompanied Children and Young People', page 35)

This process taught us a lot about how project design and institutional attitudes play a crucial role in shaping access. Given the complex barriers that occur at the structural, institutional and social level, a lot of care and attention needs to be given to modeling accessible recruitment. On reflection all partners agreed that, if we were to do this project again, we would allow far more time for thinking, development and outreach sessions in the recruitment process.

## 3. Ethics

### The Exchange

The decision to work with Asylum Seekers as opposed to 'settled' Refugees threw up new challenges. For instance, the project was initially designed for young people who were legally able to work and could be paid for their contribution. This was a key element of the original project model and bid, in order to value the young people's contribution in sharing their perspectives, ideas and time with us. If the organisational representatives are being

paid our reasoning was shouldn't the young people be too?

So what would we do now that a proportion of them couldn't be paid? Furthermore, as many of the young people were involved in an evolving asylum process we discovered that they were granted refugee status at different times throughout the course of the project. How do we carve up payments to reflect this? What would be fair? All of these questions were complicated to answer.

Choosing to pay a group of participants revealed attitudinal dilemmas around cultural access and entitlements. Should young people be expected to want to participate in a 'free' arts project simply out of interest and enjoyment? How do cultural organisations (and ditto how do the young people) define value?

All Advocates were in agreement that in a process designed to share ideas and knowledge, payment of participants (who were also facing demanding day-to-day challenges) was a reasonable exchange. In addition, it started a process of learning for the young people about formalised engagement and the responsibilities which accompany it.

We also offered tailored educational options for participants with most of them choosing to learn to drive. As an arts organisation, filling out provisional driving license forms felt strange, and highlighted

the huge gap between the cultural mission of the organisation and what these young people had identified they needed in order to progress in their lives. The reality was that they urgently wanted employment (i.e. gaining an income source as a taxi or delivery driver). From this we learnt that we had to try and look at the whole picture, to understand the access barriers these young people were facing in society more broadly, and devise an arts participation opportunity that took a holistic approach.

### **Consent**

Those we worked with had very basic English language skills. They had never been to London before and didn't have any awareness of galleries / museums in the UK. However, they did know what an artist was. Communication barriers and gaps in cultural understanding were bigger than anticipated. Although challenging, it forced us to think more deeply about communication techniques, arts terminology and differences in cultural background.

Advocates realised they had to make something invisible, visible – how do you access arts organisations or museums if you don't even know what they are? The concept of a gallery was entirely new. If you don't know what a gallery is, or don't have any understanding of the cultural context in the UK, do you really know what you are consenting to do as a participant on the project?

These sorts of challenges around ethical recruitment of the young people were difficult to resolve. In the end, we recognised it was highly unlikely that the young people did fully understand the project or what they were agreeing to. So, we decided to foster an open approach and to encourage young people to self-select. This meant that sometimes they would arrive with their flat-mates and friends, sometimes a young person would begin mid-way through the project and stay for its duration, and sometimes a young person wouldn't come back. Eventually we attracted a core group of 14 who were highly engaged and had record attendance when compared to any of the partners' previous long-term projects with young people.

### **Instrumentalisation**

In light of the project being an enquiry into access issues within an institution, and the challenges around the young people's consent (as described above), we were mindful of how much the project risked instrumentalising the group of participants. The joining together of an institutional agenda with the realities of these young people's lives became an important point of reflection prompting the following questions:

How do we create a safe space so that the young people feel valued and ensure the project has relevance to their lives?

As the consortium determined the purpose and agenda of the enquiry, how could we adopt goals, which were co-created / agreed with participants?

How could we avoid limiting the identity of participants as solely refugees / marginalised young people?

These questions recurred and were addressed most effectively in our facilitation methods. We tried to strike a balance between the agenda of the enquiry and the young people's interests. We listened to them and encouraged active expression of interests and ideas, providing choices and avoiding hierarchies. We never asked them to tell us their refugee 'story' (they often have to repeatedly recount their story to social services / government officials) or to define themselves as refugees within the project. We also initiated an exchange through the provision of travel costs, remuneration (where possible) and learning options in recognition of their contribution and wider needs.

## 4. Institutional Messaging

Our enquiry asserted the right of young people to access public cultural spaces and we tried to develop approaches to enable them to gain a sense of belonging within them. To do this, we had to identify what made young people feel included and excluded. Through a series of activities with participants we reviewed the implicit and explicit messages and the expected norms for behavior in cultural spaces.

We learnt that cultural spaces are imbued with both non spoken and overt messages, many of which don't sit comfortably with the proposition that publicly-funded organisations and museum collections are open to everyone. We found 'access' to be part of a complex, multi-layered system and venues can influence visitor perceptions (both positively or negatively) in the way they shape their institutional 'messages'.

A big barrier for the young people lay in the economics of spaces and they quickly made judgments as to whether they felt welcomed based on the accessibility of costs. While the galleries and collections they visited were free to enter, secondary services had considerable costs attached. For instance, at the Southbank Centre the group visiting immediately noticed that bags of crisps were £1.50, rendering their financial realities in stark contrast to the type of customer the Southbank were targeting. The messaging appeared to be that this venue was not for them.

However, although the prices at the Southbank were alienating, the venue succeeded in providing an energy and exuberance (through the live music, performances and activities both indoors and outdoors), which the young people felt very attracted to. Similarly, they felt at home in the hustle and bustle of Brixton Market, but constrained by the 'code of silence' in many of the gallery spaces.

Some of the more surprising observations made, were in regards to the ambient qualities and facilities: were venues warm, did they have comfortable seating, could you talk, could you dance, was there somewhere to charge your phone? There was a strong sense that cultural venues were assessed in terms of their use and that value was placed on what could be done in them, the social situations they could facilitate and the energy they exuded.



In summary, our creative enquiry was a starting point for all those involved, the organisations began new learning and the young people began to settle into new lives. Understanding more about access issues ended up becoming a way of understanding more about one another. We listened, reflected and tried to evolve responsively. Most importantly, we were reminded of the power of agency (particularly for those with limited opportunity) and the importance of bringing new voices into the heart of cultural life.



# 3

## FACILITATION

### Doing a Creative Enquiry

The following pages share some key activities, observations and reflections from carrying out a creative enquiry.

This was a week-by-week process where partners and participants brought together a diverse range of experiences, ideas, skills, attitudes and energies to generate the next step. A process that threw up numerous challenges and excitements and required us to remain flexible and willing to improvise.

We hope the information is useful, as a resource, a tool-kit or just as inspiration. More importantly we hope practitioners will take it up, develop it, change it and improve upon it so that we keep the conversation moving forward.

# Let's Dance!

We first introduced the project with a powerpoint, black and white handouts, and in a small pop up cinema with rows of raked seating. The young people said “this room reminds us of... a courtroom.”

We therefore committed to every session starting with dance, music, acrobatics, drama and games. This was natural, not imposed. Every time we entered a room the first thing the young people did was put on their music. A circle would emerge, movements were offered, partners should join. Don't worry, we'll start when everyone gets here. “Just being alive should make you late for everything.”

Active movement, physical interaction and play became the fundamental and necessary first steps to welcome, share and build a relationship of trust and confidence between everyone in the room.



Some games we played...

## NAMES & ACTIONS

In a circle, everyone repeat, now make it bigger!

## DANCE OFF

Exchange traditions, create new ones

## HUMAN PYRAMIDS

Arms and knees straight, knees on bum NOT back!

## CHINESE WHISPERS

Passing actions instead of words

## BODY PERCUSSION

Choose a leader, start slow and quiet, increase up, up, up!

## JELLYFISH

Pick one person and run around them 3 times... everyone does it, at the same time!

## BODY SHAPES

Using only your body and everyone in the group make a...circle, star, flower, car, whale, microwave... now make it move

## BALANCE CIRCLE

In a circle, back straight, holding wrists, number 1's lean in and number 2's lean out



# Draw the Project

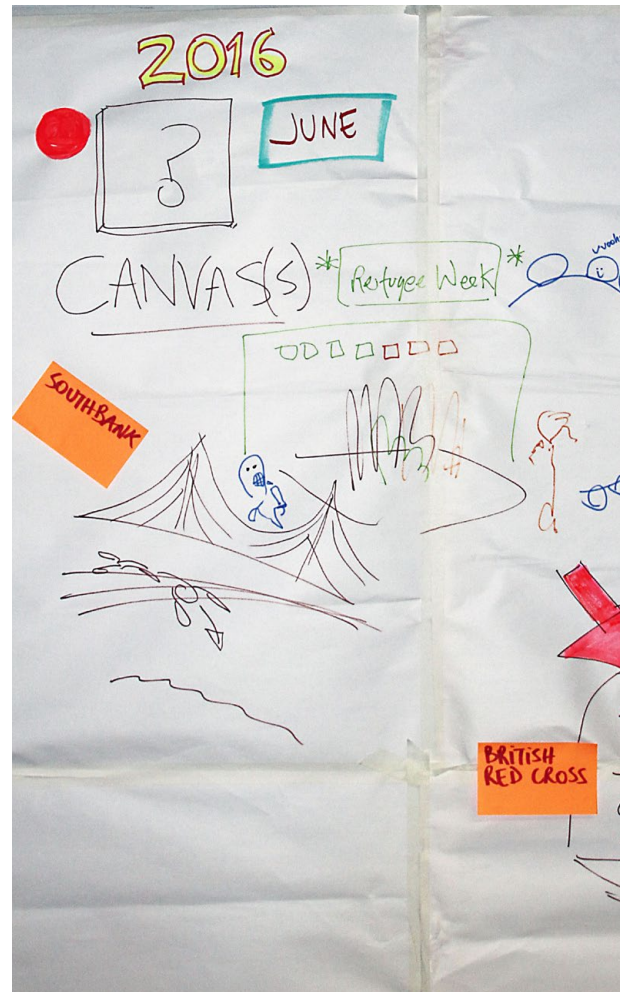
Canvas(s) partners had almost weekly meetings to devise, (re)schedule, challenge and adapt the project's structure. This meant the timeline was complex and constantly subject to change, with multiple phases, venues and activities.

How to communicate and stay on top of this? The group had hugely varied language skills, travelled from outside London on rail lines with constant disruption. Most importantly, the project needed commitment and you need to understand what exactly you're committing to.



A+B cover wall in large paper sheets

A reads the timeline from a script, vividly elaborating as many details as possible: who, what, when where, how?



So we decided to draw the project on a regular basis in order to see how it was growing, who joined when and what came next.

B attempts to draw every detail described in real time using coloured pens.

ALL either laugh at B's failure or applaud their art skills

# Food Glorious Food

Everyone needs to eat. Especially young people whose journey started in Rochester at 9:30am for a workshop in London finishing at 4pm and who may be fasting for Ramadan. At first such considerations were either overlooked or underestimated. Were participants confused, bored? At times, maybe, but often it was 'just' hunger and this went on to become one of the first questions when running a session.

Food was a gesture of comfort, hospitality and sharing. When the young people invited friends and the public to an event they organised at Autograph ABP's gallery they served food from their country. They made photographic portraits holding colourful, woven baskets used to hold ngera bread, coffee, popcorn and incense. It was a key part of their welcome, which happened to set the gallery's fire alarm off and provoked ensuing conversations about regulation and conduct within the institution.

... social, cultural and structural differences became visible through food.



... next time we start the project with a meal?



# Prize for the Winners

Fierce competition is not usually associated with inclusive participatory arts. But from the beginning it was obvious how important it would be for Canvas(s).

If an activity was written and performed in the form of a quiz or team sports then it worked. It tapped into their desire to challenge each other (and win) and work together (to out do others).

Team Canvas became a shared identity involving participants and partners. It gave continuity and commitment when we came together across different spaces and places. It allowed us to focus on collective decisions on how to progress, rather than on individuals (re)telling their story.

Many of the participants didn't know each other before the project started and by the end had developed close relationships. We learned that this was one of the biggest impacts of Canvas(s) for their lives.

**CANVAS(S) HUMAN BINGO**

Read the descriptions below. Find someone who matches that description, then write their name in that particular box along with any other requirements indicated. When you complete four boxes in a row – horizontal, vertical or diagonal – be sure to say **BINGO!** There'll be prizes for whoever completes all of the boxes.

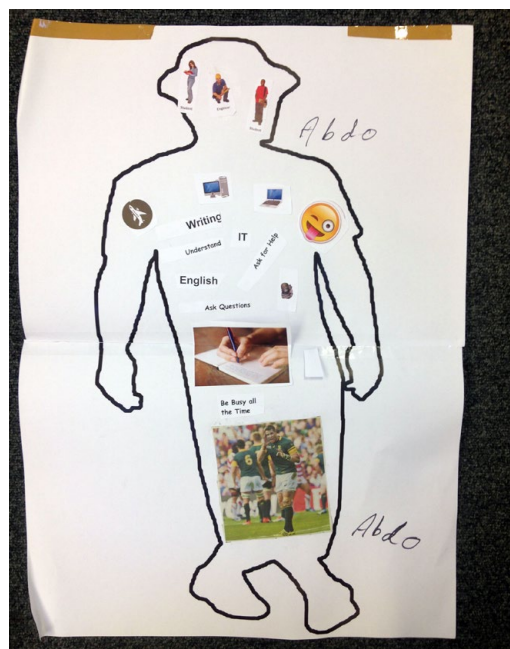
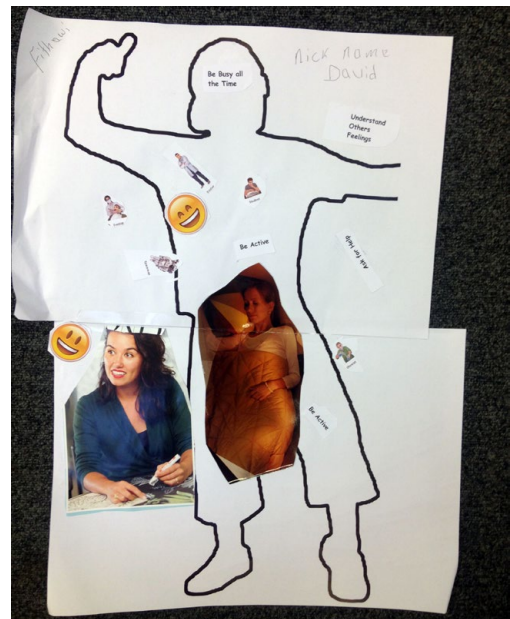
Grandparents came from another country (which one?)	Speaks 3 languages or more (write down which languages?)	Has met someone famous (write that name)	Has watched a film in the last month (write the name of the film)
Can repeat the phrase 'toy boat' 5 times fast (you set the speed)	Supports Manchester United.	Has ever organised a Party for 10 or more people.	Can 'Dab'? (and can show you)
Has painted a picture in the last 6 months?	Has climbed a mountain (which one?)	Can roll their tongue.	Has written or read a piece of poetry in the last month.
Has travelled on a train, a bus and a bicycle this week.	Has read a Newspaper this week (which one?)	Plays the piano or guitar	Has been to a place by the sea in the last month?



# Identity Collage

Canvas(s) aimed to address the right of the young people's voices and interests to be heard in public cultural spaces rather than their personal history as refugees to U.K. However, we had to open up a space to discuss how to make cultural spaces more relevant to their lives. Collage fitted the bill. Magazines, newspapers, emojis, clip art, words, slogans. Lots of cut-out scraps at the end for participants to take home as a further resource.

Through collage they showed their personal ambitions, hopes, aspirations and desires for the future. To learn English, drive, become a mechanic or engineer, operate a forklift truck. Collage brought them together to decide what their shared ideal space could be. A healing space, music, freedom, family, wifi, next to a marina, happiness, achievement, money. These became key reference points when reflecting on what they liked about cultural spaces and how to change them.



# Make your Pitch

Starting your own business was a common link amongst the young people. They wanted to learn trades rather than develop creative practices. So to generate ideas we played Dragons Den or Al Mashrouy (the Sudanese TV version) to work out future activities. Making a pitch, selling an idea and doing business were much more relatable to the young people's aspirations than the terms of arts and culture.

After visiting a number of cultural spaces the young people organised a tour of their own. Identifying locations, planning activities and a schedule, sticking to the budget. 3 options were pitched: 'Women of the World Tour', (Southbank Centre and Feminist Library); 'Greenwich Habesha Tour' (Royal Observatory and Market); 'London Zoo & Madam Tussauds Tour'.



It became immediately obvious the Zoo tour was a tongue in cheek proposal that made no financial sense whatsoever and whose only rational was that we could see a tiger. Cue a tactical voting process where rival teams tried to stop the 2 serious pitches from winning with the end result being the Zoo tours unlikely victory.

After a brief period of chaos voices in the group appealed for calm. "Let's be serious, we need to actually organise this for next week and we need to include everyone. Ditch the zoo and lets choose together between Women's Rights and the History of Time".

In the end the schedule only allowed for the Greenwich Habesha tour but the name should be changed. Habesha isn't inclusive of Sudanese or British people so it became THE GREENWICH tour.



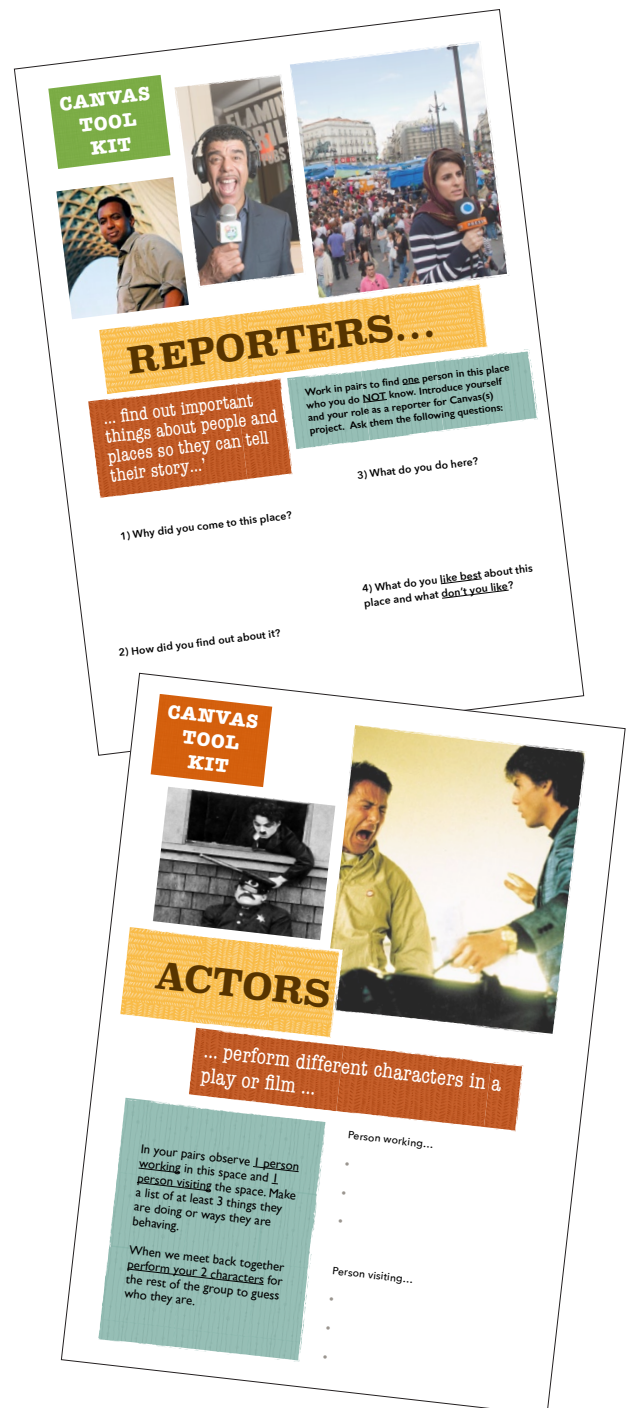
# Newsflash

Consortium partners created a number of 'research toolkits', which were introduced to participants and used together to explore different cultural spaces. They in turn encouraged us to see these places through different eyes as: Reporters (what's the story?), Actors (who are the characters?), Curators (what objects?), Explorers (what new environments?) and Referees (what rules?).



The partners had assumed the Reporter role would be the most demanding in terms of language competence and confidence engaging with strangers. Surprisingly, it was the most productive and relevant character to explore with. This challenge, to improve language and confidence, was exactly what appealed to the young people most.

The lesson became instructive. Creative facilitation didn't mean avoiding perceived weakness (just make it visual!) but creating new ways to engage with it. Performing and initiating conversation in public proved a unique and important experience with language and social interaction for the young people.



While playing reporters and interviewing the public worked surprising well, being an 'interviewee' became an uncomfortable and oppressive reminder of the asylum process. It was the tool of the Home Office. This challenged a major assumption we hadn't fully questioned: that deploying a camera and a list of questions could simply elicit participant experiences that we could review together to evaluate the project. In fact it did the opposite and closed participants off. So should we find an alternative process of self-narration?

We decided to play with the interview. To make it humorous and full of character, using props including microphones, face masks, TV sets, (real) cameras, clapper boards, mobile phones playing breaking news jingles and scripts. It took the pressure away and created a safe, playful space for them to be themselves, share reflections on their experiences during the project and the impact it was having.



... Interviews... a problem and a solution



# Young Produc..huh?

Having formed an engaged, team atmosphere, we invited the young people to produce an event for their friends at Autograph ABP's gallery. We framed it as an exercise in cultural 'production' to see what roles the young people may be inspired to adopt and maybe even see themselves in for the future.

It was a mistake. The structure of management, budget control, marketers, curators, technicians etc a) Introduced language that wasn't relevant to them b) Enforced a professionalised structure that wasn't of their choosing and c) Replicated workplace deadlines.

Our assumptions were deeply exposed and as partners we had to reflect on how the push to 'produce' an event primarily served our own ideas about and conventions relating to youth participation, agency and development. We reverted back to an informal, group dynamic and (with partners assisting on the logistics) organised 'Our Friends Party'

with food, music, hand painted textiles and a general knowledge quiz. The atmosphere was something like a social club and they owned the space.

A more constructive encounter with 'production' came through the participants collaboration with the National Gallery Young Producers. On a number of occasions these two groups met, listened to each others ideas and plans, and shared activities. It enabled the Young Producers to use their skills and experience of the institution to support the Canvas team in bringing their own voice and interpretations of the gallery to the centre for the public to hear.



# These Young Poets

Throughout the project we had explored, compared and contrasted cultural spaces. We had made lists and collages of ideal features and mapped this onto the National Gallery. The young people enjoyed the scale, colour, variety (and heat) of the galleries. But where was the music? Where was the interaction? Where were the other young people?

Reviewing the gallery's audio guides and interactive trails provoked the most vociferous and articulate criticism the group had made yet. Significantly during a project in which the young people had often felt inhibited, unsure and hesitant to be critical, they felt strongly that the guides were monotonous, boring, one homogeneous voice and had no personal touch.

The guides did however spark a crucial connection to the National Gallery collection. Henri Rousseau's painting *Surprise* (1891) immediately stimulated memory and imagination. 'What! He's never seen a tiger? But how he's painted it then?' We have tigers and the jungle in Eritrea, we know about this!' They found a direction. How to foster and develop it?



We introduced them to Adisa the Verbaliser. From the moment he shared his own words, the energy, rhythm and musicality immediately captured the young people. This was someone who could help them articulate their responses and give them confidence to voice it.



Simple devices elicited powerful responses. Write a 2 word poem. Start with 'I remember...' A colour, a texture an emotion. What is the sound? Hum it together! The painting was the foundation sparking memories of home, family and a difficult journey, but hope and desire to "step from darkness to light" (Filiman Okbay).

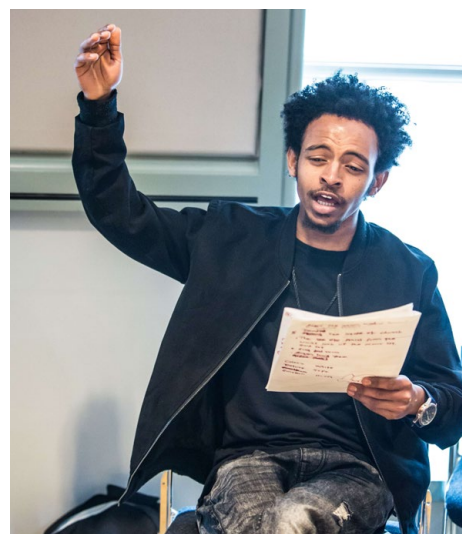
The young people were clear this was an audio guide and it needed a clear path towards the finish. So the trail began from near our familiar meeting room at the National Gallery and wove together observations, colours and emotions through the galleries to find the Surprise!

The production process wasn't smooth and easy. The recordings required intense individual sessions with Adisa and Tom

Halstead to get it right. They also made astute criticisms of the first recording: our voices aren't loud enough; it needs more structure or people will get lost.

Hearing their final work back they were proud about what they had created. They wanted to be centre stage to encourage the public to listen so they designed a Canvas Team t-shirt. Working in groups they filled the galleries along the route to converse, direct, collect headsets and keep a flow of over 100 people experiencing their version of the National Gallery.

And it clearly worked. The public referred to them as poets and said it had given them completely new ways of experiencing the gallery. People coming from diverse backgrounds said it was the first time they had really connected with the gallery. Some of the young people said it was the first time they had felt confident since arriving in the UK.



“...the definition of ‘simple yet elegant’.”



# Canvas Cake

During the project we ran some review sessions that tried to evaluate the impact of the work on the participants. Why did they come? Why did they keep coming back? What did they get from it? Was it helping them in their lives?

We tried to do this in accessible ways given the barriers of language and anxieties of self-revelation. We made a big ratings chart to mark different aspects of the project out of 10. We made masks and interviewed ourselves to see how the project changed us. We filled out colourful resources about the good and bad of the project (the heart = what you loved; the magic wand = what you change; the bin = what you trash etc). However it never quite felt as if we had elicited their candid opinions

and experiences of the project. Perhaps it was the institutional rooms we held the sessions in; perhaps the flipchart and coloured pen.

Then we were invited to their achievement party held at a Btset's house in Dartford. Her mother cooked Ethiopian food and they ordered a cake with our group picture at the National Gallery. We sat in a circle, ate and intermittently danced. It was their project review and it was the perfect space to actually see the immediate significance of the project for them. What happens next? When will we meet now? When will the photographer make the bigger portrait of me?



All questions we couldn't immediately answer but a clear indication that we need to continue.

# Newly Arrived Unaccompanied Children and Young People

## UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN SEEKING ASYLUM IN THE UK IN 2016: (86% OF APPLICANTS WERE MALE)

AGED 16 – 17	65%
AGED 14 – 15	24%
AGED UNDER 14	8%
AGE UNKNOWN	3%

## TOP 9 CHILD ASYLUM APPLICANT PRODUCING COUNTRIES IN 2016:

AFGHANISTAN	740
ALBANIA	407
ERITREA	405
IRAN	366
IRAQ	303
SUDAN	258
VIETNAM	175
SYRIA	146
ETHIOPIA	101

Extracted from: Children in the Asylum System,  
Refugee Council, May 2017

[www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0004/0485/  
Children\\_in\\_the\\_Asylum\\_System\\_May\\_2017.pdf](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0004/0485/Children_in_the_Asylum_System_May_2017.pdf)

## Access considerations:

Newly arrived asylum seeking children and young people face many restrictions in British society, including: legal, economic, education, language and cultural barriers.

- Asylum Seeker's aren't allowed to work, have a bank account, learn to drive or attend various education colleges
- They often arrive with very limited English language skills, although many take English classes once in the UK
- Unaccompanied children will most likely have 'looked after' status and entitlements. This means they will have a social worker, will be housed by the local authority, receive financial support (based on assessed need) and will have a personal education plan
- Asylum seekers are not permitted to conduct "voluntary work" but they are allowed to "volunteer".

More information can be found in:

Permission to work and volunteering for asylum seekers, published for Home Office staff January 2017

[www.gov.uk/government/uploads/  
system/uploads/attachment\\_data/  
file/583192/Permission-to-work-v7.pdf](http://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/583192/Permission-to-work-v7.pdf)

- Once an Asylum Seeker has achieved refugee status (and has a Biometric Residence Permit) they gain many more legal rights and are legally able to work



# Considerations when Working with Young People from Refugee Backgrounds

Robert Lloyd, British Red Cross

Service Manager for Refugee Support, International Family Tracing and Anti-Trafficking for Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire

- If you are undertaking an ice breaker or general exercise which demands the person to express their perspective they may at first find this a frustrating task. It is not necessarily that the person has not been free to express themselves previously; different cultures have different means of expression and vocalising everything is a particularly Western trait.
- Consider the way you arrange seating arrangements. Sitting cross-legged or 'putting your feet up' may be responded with stares and the odd whisper. Participants of the opposite sex may not be used to sitting next to each other and may at first find it uncomfortable or distracting.
- When setting a timetable consider whether anyone in the room may need to leave early, e.g. to pray.
- A young person may refrain from shaking your hand following prayer, particularly for young people who have been raised in conservative upbringings.
- If you are female a young person may at first avoid looking you in the eye when speaking to you. In many countries looking an elder or a woman in the eye is deemed rude.
- You may receive questions and perhaps a few stares if your dress code is something of a culture shock to young people present. Don't presume the person staring is rude or sexist/bias; it may be the first time they have had the chance to communicate with someone with a piercing or bright coloured hair.
- It is not discourteous or xenophobic to encourage everyone to speak in English if they can. For example, you may have a room of namely Tigrinya speakers with a couple of Pashtu and Arab speakers. If the majority of the room starts speaking Tigrinya when you break into group exercises the young participants who are not Tigrinya speakers may feel left out. In such an instance do not be surprised if participants begin to split into specific lingual/cultural groups, for nobody likes to feel left out.

- When greeting someone for the first time permit time to talk to them one to one and as opposed to initially addressing them as part of a group of refugees attending an event for refugees. 'Face' (someone's dignity/ honour at face value) is taken more acutely in some cultures.
- Ask the individual if they would like an interpreter, do not assume.
- If you are going to learn some language phrases from one culture refrain from using them in a group unless the entire group is from that culture. To do so in a mixed group can look like favouritism.
- Its not prejudice for a male or female young person to initially appear to have preference asking questions or advice from someone of the same sex, as this may simply be what they are used to.



# CREDITS

Many thanks to the Canvas(s) Team

Canvas(s) was managed by Autograph ABP, a charity that works internationally in photography and film, cultural identity, race, representation and human rights.

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Design: GUNMAD

THE  
NATIONAL  
GALLERY



COUNTERPOINTS ARTS

