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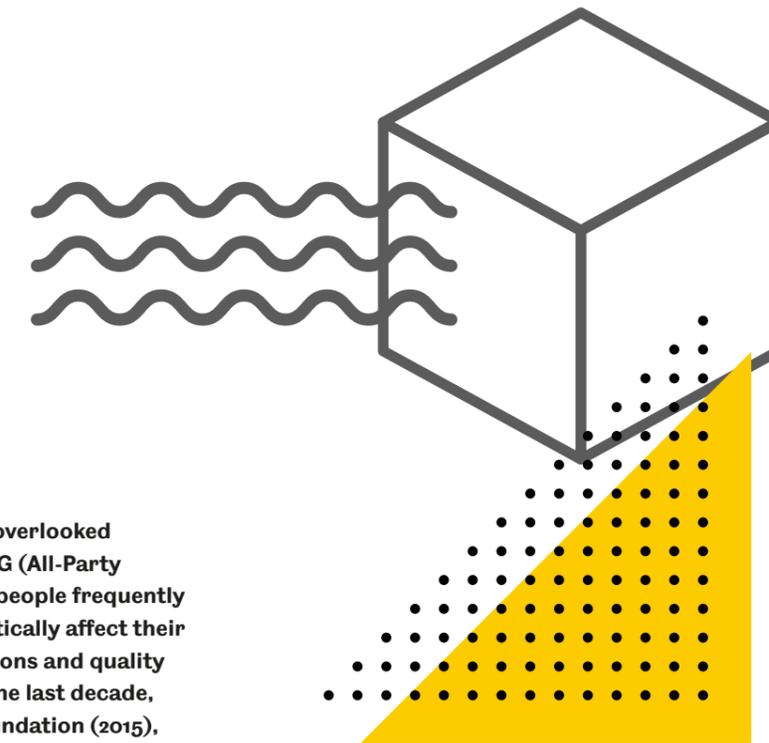
Dismantling Ageism in the Professional Art World

Insights from an online symposium involving
University of Sheffield researchers and
older artists from around the UK

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Background

Age discrimination in the UK is a pressing yet largely overlooked issue that urgently needs addressing. As a recent APPG (All-Party Parliamentary Group) (2019) report indicates: 'Older people frequently experience discriminatory treatment that can dramatically affect their wellbeing, confidence, job prospects, financial situations and quality of life'. Although there has been some progress over the last decade, spearheaded by organisations such as The Baring Foundation (2015), there is still plenty of work to do. This is certainly the case in the Arts & Humanities, where recent efforts to tackle ageism have focused on promoting art as a recreational activity, rather than as a professional practice for older people to pursue as a career. We see evidence of this in the recent *Older and Wiser?* report, where the benefits of creative participation is emphasised throughout, but little to no mention is made of the positives of professionalisation (Gordon-Nesbitt 2019).

This is a concerning development. Denying older people the opportunity to professionalise their practice risks limiting aspirations, prohibiting full independence, threatening financial stability and ultimately impeding efforts to improve health, wellbeing and overall quality of life. It also means that the older artists currently trying to forge a career in the arts are left to tackle discrimination and exclusion without guidance or support.

Ageism and other intersecting systems of power and discrimination certainly pervade the arts industry. As Joanna Walsh (2017) has put it: 'Make no mistake: if you run a prize, a "best of" list, a residency, with age guidelines you can't fully justify then, however otherwise diverse your awardees, you and your organisation are consolidating racism, sexism, class and gender discrimination'. Taking ableism into account as well, it is clear that the arts industry discriminates against a broad spectrum of older artists.

Dismantling ageism in the professional art world is a complex issue which requires a multifaceted approach; one that is informed by a range of experiences and perspectives. It is for this reason that the Creative Lives symposium brought together a range of researchers, galleries and older artists to share their research, experiences and observations on the issue of ageism. It was our hope that participants would leave feeling more informed, supported and empowered to make substantial, long-term changes to the professional art world, and, ultimately, older people's lives.
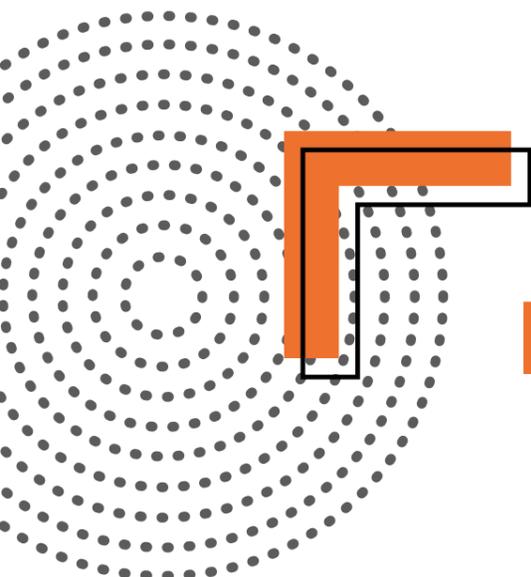
The Creative Lives Symposium

The Creative Lives symposium was originally conceived as a two-day event held at The Hepworth Wakefield. The intention was to invite a range of academics, artists and policy makers (approximately 30 delegates in total) to discuss the most significant issues and solutions regarding ageism in the professional art world. The ultimate objective was to establish a comprehensive action plan for future activity.

However, due to rapid developments concerning COVID-19, the event was delivered as a one-day online symposium on the 17th March 2020. A substantial number of researchers, gallery representatives and artists, from various professional and personal backgrounds, were still able to attend.

The online symposium was conducted using Google Hangout and facilitated by Dr Kamal Birdi, who adapted his *Clear Ideas* model to engage participants in a number of thought-provoking activities via Google docs. After a keynote speech by Joanna Walsh and a legal overview of age discrimination by Dr Joe Atkinson (School of Law, University of Sheffield), participants were asked to:

- **Illuminate** the meaning of key terms such as "older" and "artist"

- **Diagnose** the most significant issues relating to ageism in the arts

- **Erupt** with ideas for solving these problems

- **Assess** the merits of each one

- **Select** the ideas worth pursuing

This report summarises the key issues and solutions which emerged from the discussion, as well as plans for future activity.

WITH THANKS TO ALL ATTENDEES FOR THEIR INVALUABLE CONTRIBUTIONS:

Anita Franklin, Carmen Levick, Desiree Reynolds, Elaine Horne, Eelyn Lee, Emma Bolland, Jane Lawson, Jarek Adams, Joanna Walsh, John Wilkinson, Maya Chowdry, Nicola Pennill, Sai Murray, Sandra Whyles, Sarah Feinmann

Key Issues

In the first half of the symposium, participants were asked to share their thoughts (via Google Docs) on all age-related issues in the professional art world. After adding and responding to comments, participants were then given an opportunity to place an 'x' next to the issues they considered to be most significant. Below is a summary of the key issues that emerged from this exercise.

1. EXTERNAL PERCEPTIONS

One recurring issue was the impact external perception had on the opportunities afforded to older artists. The media was identified as a key culprit, with its perpetuation of a 'desired look', an 'optics', which enforced ageism due to its 'fetishisation' of youth. A related issue was unconscious bias, with participants noting the way 'pervasive societal norms' determine discriminatory attitudes towards older artists. In the context of the professional art world, this was said to inform the perceptions and behaviours of potential collaborators, commissioners, organisations, funders and other gatekeepers.

Whilst impressing the value of engaging with younger artists and developing intergenerational connections, participants felt stereotypes and unconscious bias meant younger artists were reluctant to work with older artists, particularly older women 'who they see as only mum or even granny'. For one participant, the mainstream media's fetishisation of youth 'makes it difficult for younger artists to learn from, build upon, collaborate and honour the work that has gone before if the message is constantly reinforced that this is all new, exciting, of the now'.

> *'There is a desired look (promoted)by media - most evident in arts such as the fashion industry which discriminates against age from a physical appearance but also evident and reinforced across most arts.'*

2. SELF-CONFIDENCE

A lack of self-confidence also emerged as a significant issue. This was seen to be particularly problematic because of the need for older artists to display 'extra confidence' in order to 'excite curators and commissioners if you are not going to be seen as a glamorous young thing'.

Self-confidence issues were said to arise amongst the older artists because of consistently receiving knock-backs as a direct result of their age. However, it was also noted that low self-confidence was the result of other, intersecting forms of discrimination such as classism, racism and sexism.

> *' If you've experienced any kind of oppression it's hard not to internalise it (as) self doubt, imposter syndrome (and) lack of confidence'.*
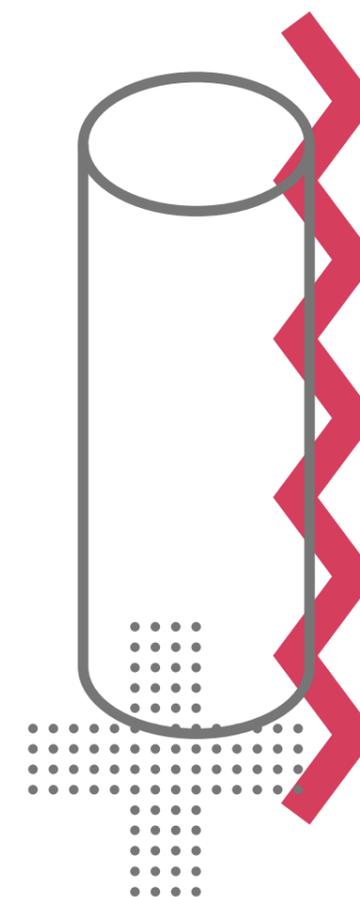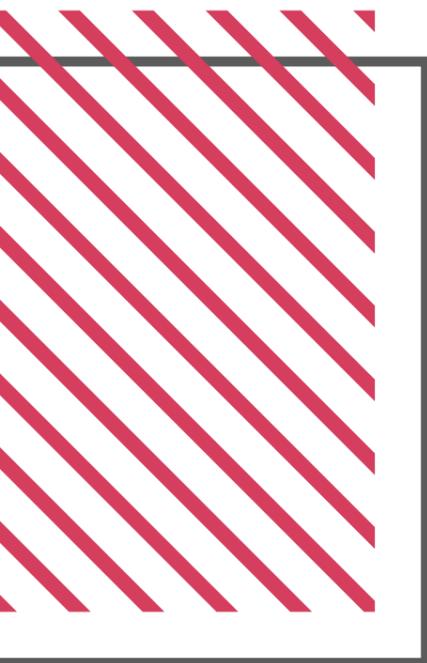
3. INTERSECTIONAL FORMS OF DISCRIMINATION

Intersectional forms of discrimination were seen to be a major issue when it comes to ageism in the professional art world. Whilst sexuality, social status and disability issues were referenced, race, class and gender dominated discussion in this area.

'The more time you spend on the planet, the more racism (you endure), the more this exhausts you and affects your self-confidence and belief in yourself as an artist'.

In regard to race, participants noted how Black and other artists of colour are expected to produce a certain type of art (typically involving themes of pain and trauma) in order to receive funding. This was said to stifle creativity, play into stereotypes and add to the already exhausting impact of everyday racism as a consequence.

There was a similar response to sexism. Relating to the issue of external perception, participants highlighted how older women are considered incapable of producing noteworthy art and are only deemed suitable for childcare, mentoring the young and being part of an audience. This was felt to prevent older women from being seen as professional artists, rendering them invisible in the art world.

'There's a particular perception of older women as not capable, perhaps particularly because they've often been excluded from high-status professional work as unpaid carers. They also often don't fit the requirement for a glam author/artist profile photo '.

It was also agreed that a person's class position often determined whether they turned to art later in life. For some, there was a need to secure a stable living before focusing on developing art as a professional practice, which meant they may have missed out on opportunities reserved for younger artists.

4. OTHER LIFE COMMITMENTS

The need to attend to other life commitments, as well as the failure of curators, residencies and organisations to acknowledge and accommodate these commitments, were cited as being another major issue in the professional art world.

The difficulty of focusing exclusively on artistic practice, travelling to show nationally and internationally, working for free, and taking up long-term residencies because of care and other responsibilities were all mentioned as considerable obstacles older artists have to navigate.

5. AGE BARRIERS STIPULATED IN CALLS FOR WORK

Age barriers in calls for work, from residencies to prizes to exhibitions, were felt to be a major issue. One participant noted that this was a systemic problem that discriminated against older artists regardless of individual self-confidence.

'The calls for work stipulate the age barrier. I'm noticing folk are talking about confidence etc., but the barriers are in the actual ads'.

6. NETWORKS

The difficulty of finding, navigating and fitting into networks was the subject of much discussion amongst participants. Engaging in networks was seen to be an important endeavour because it allows artists to form peer review groups; get to know curators, commissioners and other stakeholders; as well as meet and mix with younger artists.

However, previously mentioned issues such as external perception and lack of self-confidence means that, according to participants, these opportunities are harder to come by for older artists. bOlder, a talent development programme for contemporary artists over 50, led by Castlefield Gallery (Manchester), was cited as a positive example of a newly established peer group that seeks to address this very problem.

'Older artists often aren't part of an artist peer group, especially if they've been out of the game for a while, e.g. doing other work or caring. They often talk about a lack of confidence/ encouragement and critical feedback - this makes a huge difference, and is something the bOlder artists have talked about and also members of (Castlefield Gallery's) Associates programme. The bOlder artists have now set up their own peer support group, which will continue beyond the end of the programme'.

7. GATEKEEPERS

All the issues explored above were felt to be compounded by the fact gatekeepers (curators, funders, art schools, universities etc.) ignore the valuable skills and experiences of older artists, whilst making uninformed decisions - based on perception - that detrimentally impact the opportunities available to these artists.
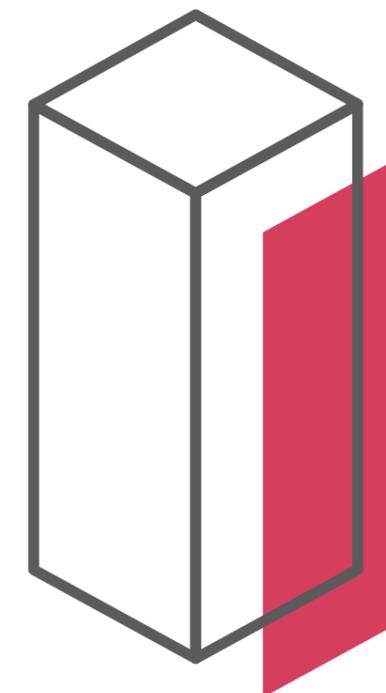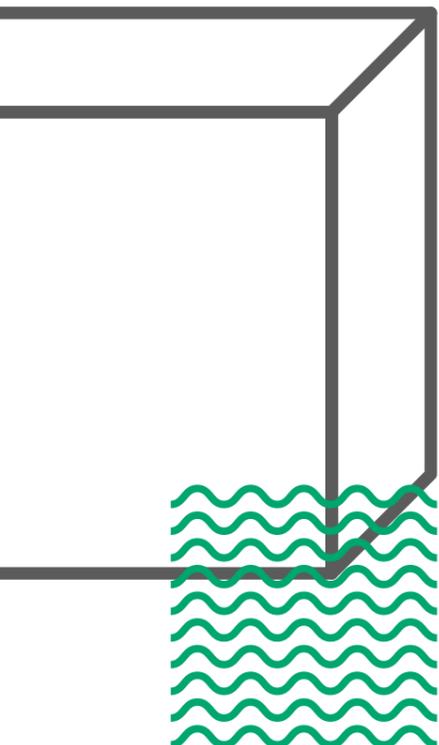
Key Solutions

In the second half of the symposium, participants were asked to present some solutions to the key issues identified earlier in the day. As before, participants discussed these solutions via Google Docs and then put an "x" next to what ones they considered to be the most promising. Below is a summary of the key solutions identified by participants.

1. EXTERNAL PERCEPTIONS

Enhancing the visibility of older artists was a popular idea for confronting external perceptions, particularly media bias and stereotypes. Suggestions included having older artists fronting and participating in artistic programmes and schemes, as well as establishing more of a presence on social media.

Participants were also keen to engage younger people on the subject of ageing, as well as train and/or lobby media outlets. Ideas included 'asking the Guardian to consult with us when they run a spread on "exciting new artists/writers etc" or running creative workshops where younger artists and media outlets 'engage with image making, drawing, writing, performing; looking in mirrors, asking them about their own fears about ageing, what they think it is to be old'. A final suggestion was to publish on strategies of resistance developed in earlier decades. This was all ultimately to highlight the value and diversity of older artists' ideas and experiences.

2. SELF-CONFIDENCE

Peer support groups and mentoring were the two most discussed solutions to self-confidence issues. There was a collective call for funders (and possibly art schools and universities) to support artist development, as well as provide production and exhibition opportunities.

However, there was also a sense that it might be more realistic to rely on self-organised peer support in the absence of funder buy-in. This was seen to be a useful alternative with much value being placed on the opportunity to share knowledge, experiences and constructive criticism as a peer group. Establishing role models, through these and other means, was also felt to be important.

*'We really need to make role models for older artists high profile...
...ensure that they are seen with all their humour, creativity, and
with much to offer to address the issues that are current today'.*

3. INTERSECTIONAL FORMS OF DISCRIMINATION

Racism and sexism were the two intersecting forms of discrimination that participants discussed the most. There was a resounding call to reflect critically on language, especially problematic labels such as "BAME"; to push for more residencies that support non-traditional artists; and to generate intersectional creative workshops which bring people together for the purpose of expressing and sharing a variety of life experiences. Participants felt it was important to not only engage with more artists from the Global South and other marginalised communities, but to also recognise the knowledge systems underpinning their art.

Decolonisation was also seen as a way to address sexism, with it 'challenging the white male perspective and actively presenting other perspectives and ways of being'. Decolonial theory calls for a wholesale investigation of Eurocentric knowledge production and practice. It not only considers what knowledge is produced but how it is produced across different institutions (Gill 2018). In the context of Creative Lives, this would likely tie into the interrogation of the media industry and the way in which it perpetuates stereotypes relating to age, race, class, gender and disability.

Another popular suggestion was supporting intersectional networks to tour exhibitions around the country. Rather than referring to the 'defining' social characteristics of the artists involved, these exhibitions would withhold such information and ask viewers to reflect on whether these things matter when engaging with art.

There was also a great desire to establish intergenerational residencies/partnerships (some of which would be 'women only') in order to recognise older women as creatives in their own right and compel younger artists to reflect critically on their perception of older women. Another suggestion was to set up discussion groups that focus on feminist art from the 60s and 70s. Overall, participants were keen to explore the complexity of women's journeys through art and honour the rich diversity of their experiences and perspectives.

4. OTHER LIFE COMMITMENTS

Solutions in this area revolved around arts organisations and funders re-evaluating and then restructuring current payment policies and practices. This meant first recognising that artists have parenting and other caring responsibilities and then making provisions to accommodate these responsibilities. Suggestions included providing accommodation for all family members, and/or covering care expenses so parents/carers could take part in workshops and residencies. The point was made, however, that arts organisations have their own financial pressures and that this would need to be taken into account going forward. An alternative suggestion was 'welcoming babies, toddlers, and those with caring needs into arts spaces as valued participants and contributors to the art (and) being non apologetic for any disruption'.
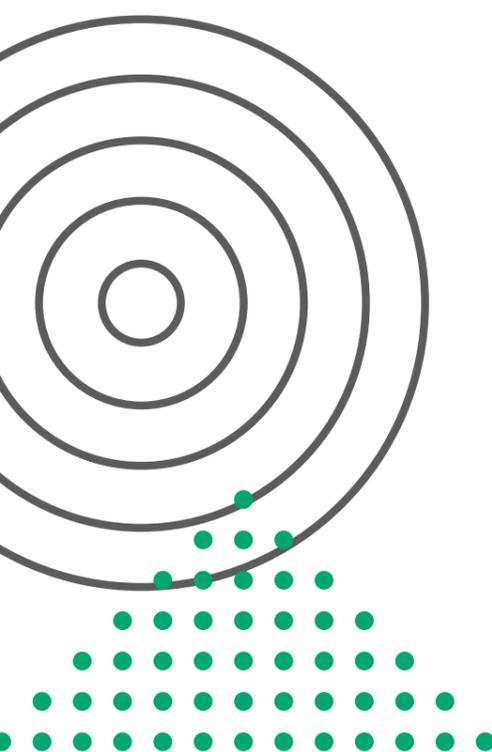
5. AGE BARRIERS STIPULATED IN CALLS FOR WORK

One recommendation was that the requirement to stipulate age in applications for work was completely removed. Alternatively, it was suggested that funded organisations should only be able to make age restrictions in specific circumstances, a decision that must then be justified with supporting evidence.

'It should be standard for any arts organisation to openly provide evidence that under 25s or 35s or 45s are particularly excluded and should benefit from their award. I've talked to organisations that have run "40 under 40" because they have 40 funding places available and it "sounded good". They literally chose the age group because it alliterated, not because 39 year-olds are more deserving than 41 year-olds'.

Practical action steps that participants felt they could implement themselves included establishing a charter, which marked organisations' commitment to engaging with older artists, and bringing a test case under the Equality Act. Some participants voiced concerns about raising issues with the very organisations that provide and administer already limited funding opportunities, whilst others advocated using personal influence to impress the issue of ageism on gatekeepers and other relevant stakeholders.

6. NETWORKS

Participants felt it was important to develop networks on a local and national level, forming alliances between groups so that authority and influence could be applied to funders, curators, art schools, universities and other gatekeepers. It was noted that non-traditional artists often find it difficult to identity networks, so there would be a need to actively seek those artists out.

'[Let's] create intergenerational networks so that older people are seen as an integral part of the contemporary art world and that they can work in productive partnership with younger artists' .

7. GATEKEEPERS

As an extension of the networking solution, participants called for gatekeepers (residencies, curators, funders etc.) to create networks for older artists; to provide mentoring opportunities; to support collaborative shows; and help challenge conscious/unconscious bias. This would require gatekeepers going through unconscious bias training themselves.

There was a strong sense that producing a dossier of examples of bias in practice would help in this pursuit, with a potential collaboration emerging between older artists and the Implicit Bias Consultancy in the University of Sheffield's Department of Philosophy.

'Turn the age thing on its head and look at the richness of our experience – that we are everyone we have ever been and that we are also the people who questioned everything, who shifted the paradigm, who took the risks, who lived by our principles and who moved society on in so many ways (though it remains racist and patriarchal) we fought and won very many important battles and learn a lot about process as well as our vision for a better society'.

Principles, Commitments & Future Activity

Arts & Humanities Knowledge Exchange intend to deliver the second segment of the Creative Lives symposium later in 2020. Following Dr Kamal Birdi's *Clear Ideas* **model, this will entail a comprehensive strategy session where participants discuss how to successfully implement selected solutions from the first meeting, which include:**

- Creating an intergenerational workshop to help younger people reflect on their attitudes to age and ultimately challenge age-related stereotypes and hierarchies

- Forming a sustainable intergenerational and intersectional network that draws and builds on models of good practice

- Drawing on and learning from stakeholders' existing networks and organisations, including No Entry Arts, the Racial Justice Network and the bOlder programme at the Castlefield Gallery

- Connecting with the University of Sheffield's Implicit Bias Consultancy and exploring their potential to deliver training on ageism to arts organisations, funders, curators and other gatekeepers

- Collaborating on art projects that display the full richness and diversity of older artists whilst confronting pressing social issues

- Formulating funding bids as a newly formed network

- Engaging with researchers from the University of Sheffield's School of Law in order to better understand and challenge current age-related protections and weaknesses in the Equality Act

- Challenging linguistic forms of discrimination, potentially in consort with the University of Sheffield's Languages and Linguistics department

During the course of the second symposium, invited participants will identify the key stakeholders involved in each selected solution, determine how best to engage them, and decide who should lead each individual project. They will then create a detailed action plan for future activity, which will be regularly reviewed and updated. A follow up report will collate and share the content of this event.
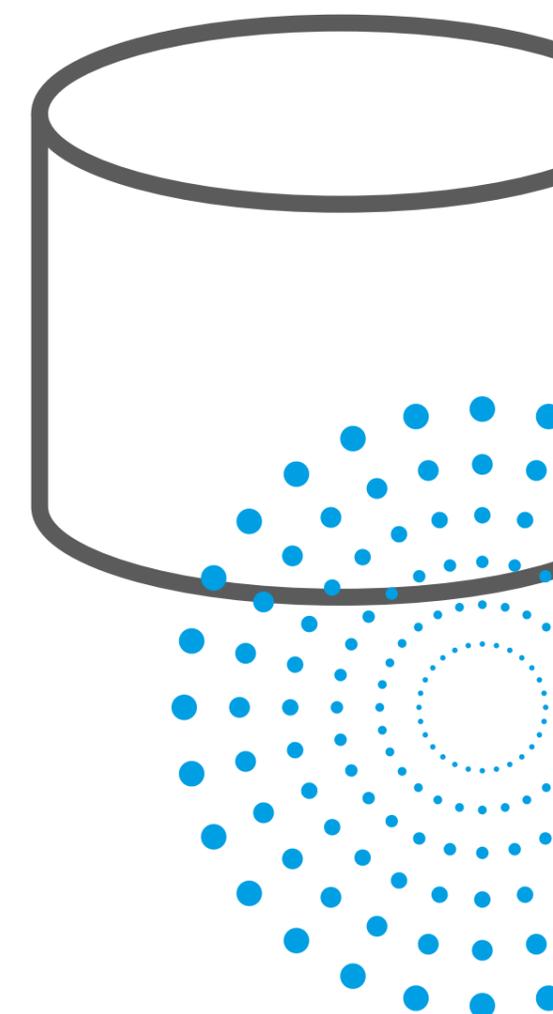
List of Symposium Participants

Jarek Adams is a playwright and dramaturg working to champion older women writers through a campaign called #writtenoffwomen. She has over 30 years experience as a professional writer but, having moved from educational theatre to the mainstream, she considers herself an emerging writer again.

Joe Atkinson is a Lecturer in Law at the University of Sheffield, where he researches and teaches in the areas of employment law and human rights. He is a member of the Sheffield Institute of Corporate and Commercial Law (SICCL), and Associate Fellow of the Sheffield Political Economy Research Institute (SPERI). Before entering academia, Joe worked in Parliament as a Senior Researcher and as a Political Advisor to the Labour Party.

Kamal Birdi is a senior lecturer in Occupational Psychology at the University of Sheffield. His areas of expertise are creativity and innovation, training and development and organisational learning. He has developed the CLEAR IDEAS framework to more effectively generate and implement new ideas in a variety of different contexts.

Chris Blackmore is a Senior University Teacher in the School of Health and Related Research (ScHARR) at the University of Sheffield. His main research interest is the role of emotions in online learning, and more generally the impact of the internet on well-being. He has been part of various projects which have established and developed e-learning Psychotherapy training around Europe.

Emma Bolland is an artist and writer who works experimentally with literatures, translations, screenwriting, performance, and moving image. They are an Associate Lecturer in Fine Art at Sheffield Hallam. They are interested in disability and inclusivity in Higher Education, and the radical possibilities of the 'alternative academy'.

Jonathan Bradley is a Knowledge Exchange Project Manager in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities at The University of Sheffield. His previous roles include Discovery and Access Manager at Green Estate CIC and Communities Manager at Museums Sheffield. He studied Fine Art at Reading University and Art and Design at Sheffield City Polytechnic.

Maya Chowdry is an artist and poet. Her art examines social justice and is infused through making work for Installation, online and live art. Maya's current live art practice uses digital storytelling to create immersive and democratic experiences for audiences utilising digital technologies and multi-platform storytelling.

Amanda Crawley Jackson is a Senior Lecturer in French and Francophone Studies at the University of Sheffield and Faculty Director of Knowledge Exchange and Impact (Arts & Humanities). She is also a curator and was formerly a trustee and Board member at Site Gallery, Sheffield.

Anita Franklin is a playwright, short story writer and narrative therapist who uses drama in her work at a women's refuge. She's Black, female, over 60, and moved from the US to the UK in 1984. Anita is semi-retired from academia at the University of Sheffield

Sabrina Fuller is interested in difference and the way being defined as different gives us licence to develop other ways of being. She explores that through the lens of feminism and of age, through sound, moving and still image and writing.

Elaine Horne is 75+ and from Manchester.

Greta Krasniqi is the Arts & Humanities Knowledge Exchange Project Assistant at the University of Sheffield. She has a BA in History and MA in American History, specialising in Human Rights Humanitarianism and Foreign Policy.

Jane Lawson is Artist Development Co-ordinator at Castlefield Gallery, Manchester, where she runs the bOlder programme for artists aged 50+ as well as the Castlefield Gallery Associates programme and the gallery's graduate programme. In her own artistic practice she is currently focussing on Radical Mycology (how and what we can learn from direct contact with the interdependent and highly resilient life cycles of fungi) and the use of diagrams to help her better understand why things are the way they are and how they could be different.

Eelyn Lee is an award-winning artist and filmmaker who has exhibited across UK including Barbican, Tate Modern, National Portrait Gallery and Whitechapel Gallery as well as internationally in Paris, Berlin, Bogotá and Toronto. Eelyn's socially engaged practice combines collective research, devised theatre, screen writing and filmmaking to create frameworks for ensembles of collaborators to work together. In 2016 she co-founded Social Art Network, a UK based community of artists committed to building agency in the field of art and social practice. www.eelynlee.com

Alex Mason is Project Manager for Arts & Humanities Knowledge Exchange at the University of Sheffield. He is also Project Manager for FirstGenSheffield, a network that supports and provides opportunities for Arts & Humanities students who are first in their family to attend university. His research interests include race, higher education, literature and Hip Hop.

Sai Murray is a poet, writer, graphic artist of Bajan, Afrikan and English heritage. His work centres around race, climate and social justice issues, working across migration, mental health and youth sectors. He is a trustee of The Racial Justice Network and a director of Chapeltown Arts. He is also a father of two young boys, and is beginning to feel the pace.

Nicola Pennill is a researcher in the Department of Music at the University of Sheffield, with an interest in group collaboration and in wellbeing aspects of music. She changed careers from business in her early 40s to music/research. She is also a visual artist and practising musician.

Désirée Reynolds is a writer and trustee of the Racial Justice Network, concerned with the legacies of colonialism and racism and how it intersects with other oppression, as well as how we can collectively work to fight those issues.

Joanna Walsh is a writer, artist and editor. She is the author of seven books including the digital work seed-story.com. Her latest book, Break.up, was published by Semiotext(e) and Tuskar Rock in 2018. She is a UK Arts Foundation Fellow, and a candidate in Creative and Critical Writing at the University of East Anglia. She founded and runs @noentry_arts (Twitter), to challenge the regulations and conversation around age and arts opportunities.

Sandra Whyles is a practising visual artist, maker and also a community arts facilitator at Chapeltown Arts, Leeds. She is of African Caribbean heritage and is both a mother and grandmother. She does not (often) feel old but is told she is old one way or another by society.

John Wilkinson is currently exploring the impact of deindustrialisation, climate change, and the shifting socio-political landscape through paintings (as well as occasionally sculpture and audio backdrops) which are brought together in exhibitions that constitute sequential narratives. He is 57, from Sheffield, and returned to being a professional artist in 2012 after experiencing ageism in the arts educational sector as a mature student of 28.
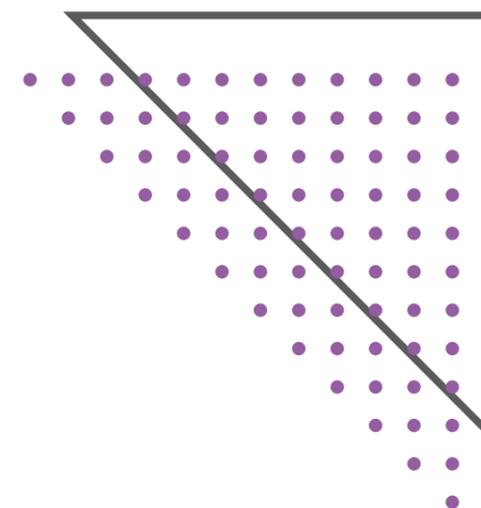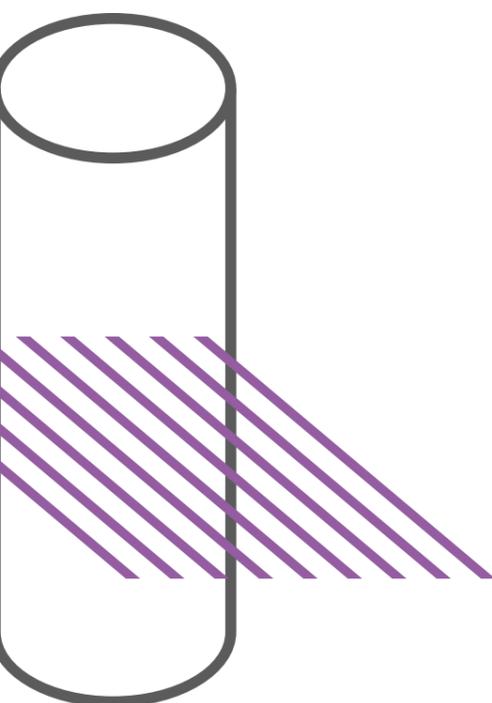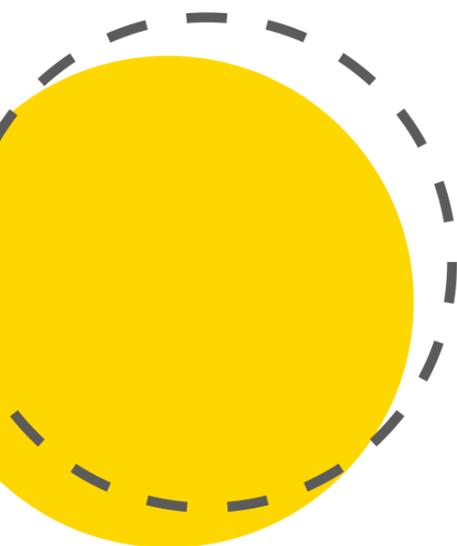
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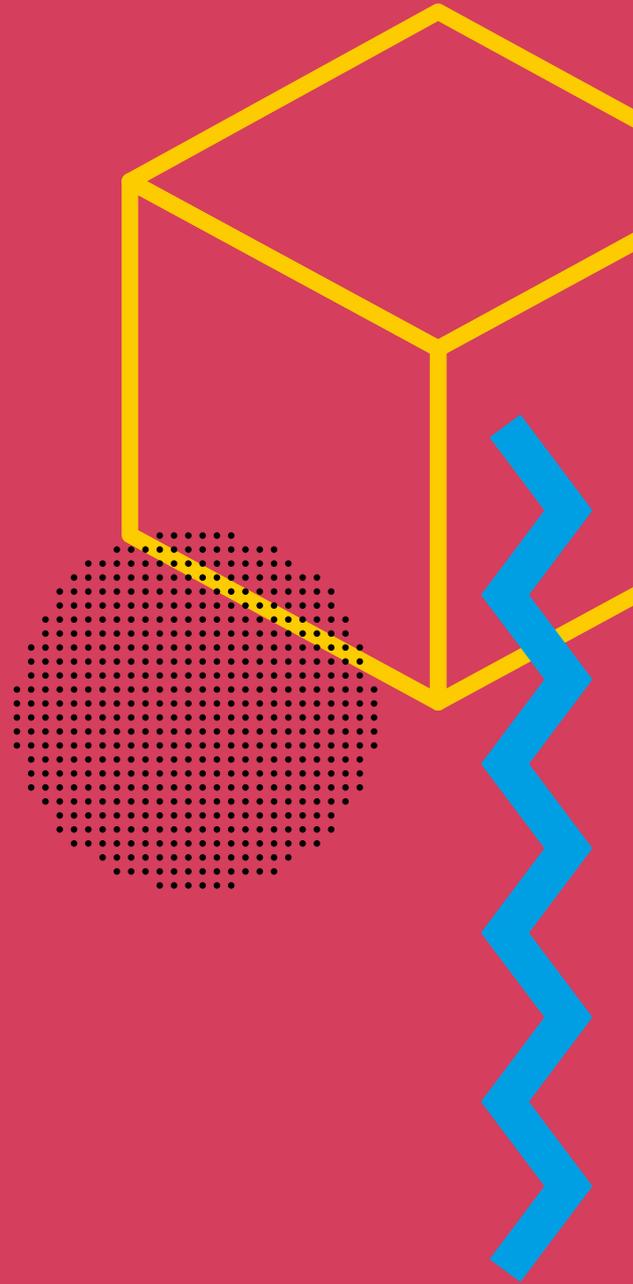
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