



Researching Cultural Participation



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Professor Hannah Thompson

Director of the Humanities and Arts Research Institute
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Researching Cultural Participation

The twenty-first century has brought new forms of participation that is prompting a revolution in how people engage in the arts and culture. Old hierarchies between producers and consumers, artists and audiences are being eroded by multiple invitations to engage in the arts, and innovative forms of creative practice are emerging that enable people to experience diverse cultures in new ways. In this environment, cultural participation is no longer simply a way to democratise existing creative practices; it has taken centre stage and is changing the ways in which artists and cultural organisations work.

Royal Holloway's research is leading the way in enabling cultural organisations to re-think the implications of the participatory turn. Royal Holloway researchers work with cultural organisations across the UK and internationally to inform exhibitions, memorials, performances, festivals and other forms of cultural events and creative practices. Our research addresses how participating in cultural activities promotes wellbeing, community cohesion, social change, place-making, learning and local economic development. Whether engaging in amateur or professional forms of arts and culture, on whatever scale, our research considers the immediacy of live experience and the new experiences that are possible through digital engagement.

New forms of cultural participation demand new research methods. Participants and professionals are no longer the subjects of our work but partners in it, actively involved in shaping research questions, setting agendas and defining outcomes. Our research partnerships with cultural organisations have deep roots and often last for many years, enabling new questions and collaborations to evolve as findings emerge. Some of our research is practice-based, in creative writing, musical composition, theatre, dance or film-making. In all these cases, research-informed cultural experiences enrich society and individual lives and address some of the most pressing contemporary issues. Our research evidences how cultural experiences can lessen loneliness and social isolation, foster a sense of belonging and place, and alleviate conflict-related and other forms of trauma.

Across the research community at Royal Holloway, our funded research is creating new opportunities for a wide range of different publics to engage in our cutting-edge research. As a university with an historic commitment to social justice, it is appropriate that our research today primarily addresses the social benefits of cultural participation. Our research provides evidence for the implications of cultural participation in three overlapping areas:



Examples of Royal Holloway's partner cultural organisations

Arts Council England
BBC
Bradford Science Museum
British Council
British Film Institute
Corinium Museum, Cirencester
Dickens Museum
District Six Museum, Cape Town
Forumschlossplatz Aarau, Zurich
Geffrye Museum
George Eliot Fellowship
Goethe Institute
Great North Museum, Newcastle
Hatton Gallery, Newcastle
Holocaust Memorial Day Trust
Imperial War Museum
Iris Project/Rumble Museum, Oxford
ITV
Keats House
Kew Botanical Gardens
Kröller-Müller Museum, Netherlands
Landmark Trust
Little Theatre Guild
Manchester Museums
Muslim War Graves
National Archives
National Gallery
National Maritime Museum
National Theatre
National Trust
Nuneaton Museum
Petrie Museum, London
Royal Shakespeare Company
Silchester Town Life Project
Tara Arts
Tate
Trussardi Foundation, Milan
Turner Contemporary
Wiener Library
Writing West Midlands

Place-making is central to **Professor David Gilbert**'s research on suburban faith. Working with many different faith groups in West London, his research (undertaken in partnership with UCL) shows how amateur creativity in different faith practices contributes to making an inclusive sense of place. **Professor Harriet Hawkin**'s research on creative geographies similarly engages with how cultural participation can disrupt and affirm how places are experienced. **Professor Ruth Livesey**, an AHRC Leadership Fellow, is currently researching how George Eliot's life and novels contribute to understanding place in Eliot's hometown of Nuneaton.

Learning has long been central to the work of cultural organisations, and our research is re-thinking how diverse publics can interact with collections in fresh ways. **Professor Felix Driver**'s partnership with Kew Botanical Gardens has led to creating new hands-on Mobile Museums that consider the mobility of Kew's collections, a process that requires re-thinking the way they have functioned historically and what can be done with these collections. **Professor Eric Robertson**'s research on Jean (Hans) Arp led to his curation of a major exhibition of Arp's work at Turner Contemporary in Margate, bringing new publics – especially children – to engage with Arp's playful aesthetic. **Professor Juliet John**'s collaboration with the Dickens Museum is creating new opportunities to understand Dickens in a global context through her co-curated exhibition. **Dr Hannah Platts** is collaborating with psychologist **Professor Polly Dalton** and engineer **Professor David Howard** to consider how Virtual Reality can bring the sensory experiences of Roman villas to life. **Dr Edward Madigan**'s research informed Jeremy Deller and Rufus Norris' ground-breaking *we're here because we're here*, in which thousands of volunteers participated in a live art commemoration to the dead of World War One.

Wellbeing, Inclusivity and Belonging is a theme that runs through much of our research in cultural organisations. **Professor Frank Keating** and Professor Helen Nicholson worked in partnership with Age Exchange Theatre Trust and demonstrated the importance of cultural participation in raising the quality of life for people living with advanced dementia.

What follows are seven short case studies that illustrate how Royal Holloway's research informs these themes, demonstrating how they overlap and converge. **Professor Helen Nicholson** describes how a rich history of amateur theatre-making provides opportunities for creativity and contributes to wellbeing, community-cohesion, place-making and theatrical heritage. **Dr Ruth Hemus**'s research into the women of the Dada art movement has been used to create original works with words, sounds and visuals that inspire others – from school pupils to practising artists – with the philosophical principles of chance, collage and collaboration that characterise the Dada movement. **Professor Jane Hamlett** describes working with the Geffrye Museum in London, where she used her research on Victorian

housing for the homeless to create an exhibition. This inspired homeless young Londoners to make their own creative responses that were exhibited alongside the exhibition and which made a powerful statement about how the past resonates today. **Dr Zena Kamash**'s research also evidences how cultural participation enables marginalised communities to experience a new sense of belonging. Her research in museums brought together arts, crafts and heritage practitioners with members of the Middle Eastern and North African communities living in the UK, providing a supportive space for participants affected by recent conflict in the region to craft their own objects inspired by heritage destroyed or under threat in conflict zones. **Professor Sarah Ansari**'s research concerns a different history of conflict – that of the Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 – the trauma of which still resonates among British Asian communities today. Sarah Ansari has been the historical consultant for a team that has explored ways of commemorating and raising awareness of Partition, as an intrinsic part of British history, which promotes inclusivity in Britain today.

Professor Hannah Thompson describes how audio-description and a multi-sensory approach to curating enhances the experience of all museum and gallery visitors rather than only that of visually impaired people, a concept she calls 'blindness gain'. Thompson describes an interdisciplinary experiment that tests her premise and provides clear evidence that for both blind and sighted audiences, adding tactile aspects, sounds and smells to the experiencing of visual art is more enjoyable and more instructive; she urges more museums and galleries to adopt a similar approach. **Professor Giuliana Pieri** is similarly focused on interdisciplinary approaches to cultural participation, using her specialist knowledge of an art movement – Italian Futurism – as a way to invite playful, cultural experiences that enable school and university students to think outside of their familiar disciplinary frameworks and to work together more effectively.

These seven short case studies provide just a glimpse of how Royal Holloway research supports beneficial participation in cultural experiences. Our research contribution to cultural life comes from a wide-range of disciplines and interdisciplinary research centres and institutes, among them the **Humanities and Arts Research Institute**, the **Hellenic Institute** and the **Holocaust Research Institute**; as well as research centres in **Contemporary British Theatre**; **GeoHumanities**; **the History of Television Culture and Production**; **Poetics Research**; **the Reception of Greece and Rome**; **the Study of the Body and Material Culture**, **Victorian Studies** and **Visual Cultures**. In 2018, we also launched **StoryFutures**, which places innovative storytelling at the heart of the next generation of immersive technologies and experiences, with funding from the Arts & Humanities Research Council.

Do get in touch to find out more – we welcome comments and questions: impact@rhul.ac.uk or hari@rhul.ac.uk. Authors' contact details can be found at the end of each article.

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Amateur Theatre and Cultural Participation

Professor Helen Nicholson

If you are reading this in Britain, you are very likely to be within five miles at least one amateur theatre company. Amateur theatre is a dynamic part of the contemporary landscape of live performance; each year in England alone over 2,600 drama and musical theatre companies stage over 10,000 productions that entertain over 21 million people. The scale of participation in amateur theatre is similar in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales, with each country building on their distinctive local traditions of performance. Research led by Royal Holloway, University of London investigated how amateur theatre contributes to the contemporary cultural landscape, focusing on how it sustains individuals and connects communities across England. Amateur theatre is a passion for many, in which people contribute to their communities by making theatre as a labour of love.

Our research illuminates the ways in which amateur theatre defines identities, and how the enthusiasm of its participants creates and builds communities. In many small communities it shapes cultural life through the annual cycle of productions, and the seasons are marked through the pattern of the repertoire. The research showed that amateur theatre is often a lifelong interest, woven into the rhythms of everyday life. It demonstrated four key ways in which participating in amateur theatre makes a difference to cultural life.

1. Amateur theatre is an important part of the nation's theatrical heritage

The contribution amateur theatre makes to the cultural economy, both nationally and locally, is widely underestimated. Amateurs have a long history of staging new plays, and this has ensured their life beyond their first professional productions. It was amateurs who famously staged Pinter's *The Birthday Party* in 1959, reviving a play that had closed after five days when it received its first professional production in 1958. Pinter's involvement in this and other amateur productions ensured its place in the national canon. Today, many new plays by contemporary playwrights are staged by amateurs as soon as rights are released. Professional playwrights benefit from profile and income this generates, and publishers also benefit from the amateur market. Nick Hern Books, for example,

Far from the stereotype of 'amateurish' productions, our research found that amateur theatre-makers are often experts, having honed their skills as performers, set-builders, costume-makers or directors over many years.

which has a reputation for publishing cutting-edge new plays, recognises the value of amateurs both to their business model and to the cultural economy. Professional stage lighting companies, choreographers and musicians similarly benefit from amateur employment and trade, as do local DIY shops and small businesses who supply craft materials for productions.

2. Amateur theatre provides offers opportunities for creativity

People from many different backgrounds sustain their different creative interests through amateur theatre, with many honing their craft skills and expertise over a lifetime. Many amateur theatre-makers describe how participating offers opportunities for creativity not afforded in other aspects of life. Some people bring their professional expertise as electricians or carpenters to stage lighting or set-building, finding creative ways to use their technical skills in artistic ways. For this demographic (largely white, working class men over 40), amateur theatre is often the only cultural activity in which they regularly participate, but they possess significant expertise in their chosen theatre craft. Others take their roles as directors and performers seriously, sometimes taking classes or participating in workshops offered by professionals. Far from the stereotype of 'amateurish' productions, our research found that amateur theatre-makers are often experts, having honed their skills as performers, set-builders, costume-makers or directors over many years. Informal systems of apprenticeship encourage participants to learn from each other and craft knowledge is frequently shared by working together and via YouTube and Facebook groups.

3. Amateur theatre is a social activity that generates wellbeing

Our research showed that amateur theatre brings together participants across generations, supporting people through difficult times and ameliorating loneliness. In many small communities it also shapes cultural life through the annual cycle of productions, and the seasons are marked through the pattern of the repertoire. The regular cycle of productions brings people together over time, and the familiarity contributes to sustained feelings of wellbeing. Quiet support is offered to company members experiencing life's difficulties, where making theatre is an absorbing pastime that is often described as an 'escape'. The demise of the manufacturing industry has impacted on amateur theatre; in the second half of the twentieth century most large employers offered a thriving amateur theatre scene. Changing work patterns in the twenty-first century have led to increased precarity, short-term contracts and self-employment, bringing fewer opportunities for workplace social life. Amateur theatre is one of the few places where people from different backgrounds and generations come together with a shared purpose.

4. Amateur theatre contributes to place-making

Amateur theatre contributes to attachment to place by creating networks of social interaction. Amateur companies that own their own theatre buildings (usually members of the Little Theatre Guild) serve as a cultural hub for their communities. They are increasingly entrepreneurial, making an income and contributing to community life by generating a wide range of



Collette Lucas in *Sleeping Beauty*, Watford Palace Theatre, January 2016. By kind permission of the photographer, Amelia Brandao

cultural activities. This is particularly important in small towns or in commuter belts where attending professional theatres involves significant travel, or where cultural activities and access to youth theatres have been eroded. The Miller Centre in Caterham, for example, is home to its own theatre company, but also provides a weekly lunch club, coffee mornings, a film club, book clubs, crafts, quilting, painting, scrabble, folk dancing, table tennis, pilates, tai chi and yoga. Volunteer-led, amateur theatre companies have diversified and take their communitarian role seriously.

Barriers to participation

Throughout our research we encountered many companies that are successfully bringing people together of different ages, social and class backgrounds and including people with different abilities and disabilities. There are, however, noticeably few participants in amateur theatre who are black British, British Asian or from other racialised minorities. The research showed that two main barriers to extending and diversifying participation to this demographic.

1. The cultural stereotype that has long surrounded amateur theatre and is still rehearsed by many professionals in the cultural sector.

The perception that amateur theatre is old-fashioned, conservative and poor-quality is a barrier to widening participation. Arguably 'am dram' suffers more than other forms of amateur creativity from derogatory caricatures; amateur photographers or gardeners, for example, are respected for their expertise and knowledge, but this respect is not widely afforded to amateur theatre-makers. Some professionals have raised the profile of amateur theatre (such as through the Royal Shakespeare Company's Open Stages Programme), but the primary interest lies in 'everyday creativity' or 'community casts' where little prior experience or theatre knowledge is an important criterion for partnership projects. These projects are largely built on a deficit model – what organisers perceive to be lacking or missing in people's lives – and have the effect of maintaining cultural hierarchies and thus keeping barriers to participation in amateur theatre in place.

2. Most people are persuaded to join amateur theatre companies by people they know and by word of mouth.

The Brexit referendum revealed troubling social divisions and fragmented communities with long histories. These fault-lines are also visible in the amateur theatre sector, where most people join through friendship groups and because they know people who are already involved. Our research revealed racial divisions that are already sedimented in the towns and villages where amateur theatre thrives are replicated in the cultural demographic of the companies. In cities, where there is often greater social integration, amateur theatre companies are beginning to be more inclusive. Youth theatres are often more integrated than companies for adults, which suggests that in the long-term barriers will be eroded.

Contemporary amateur turn

This research took place in the context of a contemporary amateur turn, and a renewed interest in the amateur in the twenty-first century. Reality TV shows have brought the amateur to public attention, with amateur bakers, amateur painters, amateur choirs, amateur potters, amateur dress-makers, amateur interior designers and many others displaying technical skill, creativity and passion for their craft. The internet has brought a cultural revolution that supports a plethora of new forms of online creative participation – including bloggers, vloggers, film-makers, critics, musicians, writers – who can easily and cheaply upload their work and distribute it through a wide range of websites and platforms. Digital technologies and interactive forms of performance have tested old distinctions between producers and consumers, promising new modes of participation.

There is potential for amateur theatre to be revitalised by this new spirit of creativity, and to be more widely recognised by policy-makers and professional theatre-makers for the contribution it already makes to the cultural ecology.

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Further reading

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Holdsworth, N., J. Milling and H. Nicholson (eds.). 2017. 'Theatre, Performance and the Amateur Turn'. *Contemporary Theatre Review* 27.1.



Performing Dada's Women: Everyone can do Dada!

Dr Ruth Hemus, Dr Sonia Allori & Vaia Paziana

Published in 2009, Dr Ruth Hemus's *Dada's Women* (Yale University Press) has had far-reaching impact on both scholarly and popular understanding of this early twentieth-century avant-garde movement.

The research that informed that book, which brought to light the interventions of five women artists, writers and performers, has been animated in recent years through collaborations with partners from the creative arts sector. Sonia Allori, a musician, composer and researcher working in the Highlands and Glasgow, first set down the challenge to bring to life the legacies of the set of women highlighted in the book, namely Emmy Hennings and Sophie Taeuber who worked in Zurich, Hannah Höch in Berlin, and Suzanne Duchamp and Céline Arnaud in Paris. A small interdisciplinary team founded by Hemus and Allori was completed by the London-based visual artist Vaia Paziana. Together we work with words, sounds and visuals to create original work inspired by Dada's women.

The first motivation for this collaborative work was a desire to convey something of the works and stories of a set of inspiring women to new audiences. The project's emphasis is not on communicating documentary history but rather on offering 'ways in' – visuals, words, sounds – that might encourage audiences to find out more about these artists. The team creates original collaborative works that draw on, rather than imitate or mimic, the innovations of Dada women.

Learning through cultural participation

A second motivation is a will not only to draw in the audience or visitor but to invite them to participate. In workshops and gallery spaces we seek to empower individuals to create their own poems, collages and performances. Dada principles of chance, collage and collaboration are vital in this endeavour to produce interactive exchanges. The idea is to foster active co-production of knowledge as an alternative to classroom- or book-based teaching and learning.

Thirdly, a commitment to accessibility underpins the project. Allori is a music therapist. Paziana is a socially-engaged artist who works with Certitude, an organisation that engages individuals with mental health challenges and physical disabilities. Both are committed to accessible arts practices and widening participation, promoting disability and diversity as creatively enriching. Their expertise in outreach has been invaluable in designing and facilitating workshops.

The team has staged a number of workshops, performances and/or installations related to the project and its underlying research either in collaboration or individually. Two exemplary interventions are sketched out below.

'Performing Dada's Women', 'Theatres of Exchange', Tate Exchange, 13 February 2017

'Performing Dada's Women' was the first session in a week-long series of events in a partnership between Royal Holloway and Tate Exchange that began in 2017. A workshop and drop-in activities were attended by school pupils, undergraduate and postgraduate students, individuals responding to invitations from the charity Certitude, and the general public.



Andy Kee at Tate Exchange.
By kind permission of the photographer, Andrew Mitchell

The workshop began with a brief presentation of literature and visual artworks to demonstrate the range of activities practised by Dada women. The focus was brought up-to-date by sharing contemporary responses created for the event, including a digital animation by Paziana and three original musical scores by Allori. One participant wrote, 'I loved the interdisciplinary approach (...) and found that really fascinating and inspiring.' Participants were then offered verbal and visual materials and 'instructions' to write chance poetry and make visual collages. They were invited to read or display these at the end of the workshop. This embodied production offered a way of learning about the avant-garde through creative practice. A visitor wrote, 'Everyone was encouraged to get involved directly.'

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This embodied production offered a way of learning about the avant-garde through creative practice.

For several clients from Certitude this was a first experience at the Tate and a chance to foster confidence in learning and creativity. All benefited from the chance to interact with one another beyond the confines of their usual spaces. The facilitators also learned from each other's pedagogical approaches, combining university teaching and practice-based outreach work.

Feedback was overwhelmingly positive. The constraints of formal questionnaires were bypassed by Paziana's design of original postcards with images and questions including 'What is Dada?' and 'How Dada are you?' The completed cards constituted mini artworks that were displayed in the space and photographed. One participant wrote, 'The destructive collage activity was very liberating (...) I shall endeavour to make more creative mess!'

'Exploding Collage', Hatton Gallery, Newcastle, 29 September 2018 – 16 February 2019

In response to Hemus's book *Dada's Women*, the curator Madeleine Kennedy invited us to take part in activities relating to the exhibition 'Exploding Collage'. The brief was to occupy a grotto in the architect-designed space 'Gatherings'. In this instance the photomontage artist Hannah Höch was taken as an inspiration, specifically the slogan 'Unlimited freedom for HH!' that appears in one of her works *Dada Panorama* (1919).

The team worked together to produce a multimedia collage of digital visuals and soundscape, which was installed in the intimate space of the grotto. An open invitation to visitors to help further transform our occupied grotto was also issued. Participants were provided with a range of materials they could use to alter the wood and fabric structure by 'building, sculpting and constructing'. Pens, paper, scissors, and clips could be used to write slogans or make drawings to attach to the existing structure so that it would be changed incrementally and without instruction or supervision. On the opening day we hosted a group of young people with whom the Hatton outreach team has been working. Aspiring artists, they had questions about the creative process and offered useful insights. At the time of writing the installation is still in the space and is evolving.

One of the challenges of the project is the resources required to continually produce new creative works and workshop designs. Another is the ability to reach different audiences. The team is considering ways of re-using activities in different venues, for example by visiting community groups. This would mitigate the practical and financial challenges of bringing participants to a particular venue.

At the same time we want to expand our project, specifically to incorporate movement and dance as an additional element that would connect us to other practitioners and researchers, and also engage participants in alternative ways. We are committed to involving individuals in ways that speak to their own abilities and approaches, including those with sense impairments and mobility issues. We continue to disseminate our collaborative work in incremental stages tailored to different events, locations and audiences.

The project has developed in unexpected directions. It has demonstrated the potential of linking project-based work and creative practice to encourage deep learning, with participants acting as producers of knowledge as opposed to passive receivers. Wider public engagement has been hugely relevant and rewarding in itself and in enhancing our own creative and professional practices in academic and community settings.

More information on the project can be found at:
www.dadaswomen.wordpress.com/about-the-project/
Please sign up/follow for updates.

For the workshop at Tate Exchange see:
www.bit.ly/2VRie8u

For the intervention at the Hatton Gallery see:
www.bit.ly/2GkoH5o

Dr Ruth Hemus is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Languages, Literatures and Cultures at Royal Holloway. Her research specialism is the European avant-garde, especially women artists, writers and performers connected to Dada and Surrealism. She has worked with public arts institutions including The National Theatre, Southbank Centre and Tate Exchange in London, The Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Denmark, the Nicola Trussardi Foundation in Milan, and the Forumschlossplatz Aarau and Cabaret Voltaire in Switzerland. Ruth's first book was *Dada's Women* (Yale University Press, 2009). Her forthcoming book *From Dada to Ultramodern: The Poetry of Céline Arnould* will be published by Legenda.

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Hemus's profile page: **www.tinyurl.com/ruthhemus**

Dada's Women:

www.yalebooks.yale.edu/book/9780300141481/dadas-women

From Dada to Ultramodern: The Poetry of Céline Arnould:

www.mhra.org.uk/publications/Poetry-Céline-Arnauld

Dr Sonia Allori is a differently abled composer, performer, researcher and community music therapist. Recent commissions are: Drake Music Scotland & PRS - Lost & Found (2017/18); Sound Festival - Fall From Grace (2017); Drake Music & DadaFest - Last tango in Liverpool (2018) and Exploding Collage/Hatton Gallery - Memorial to an important lace shirt (2018). She completed a PhD in composition in 2011 which explored interactions between music and text. Sonia is researching deaf performance at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, is a member of Sonic Bothy and has recently performed in Ellie Griffith's Sound Symphony which toured Scotland in Spring 2019.

SoundCloud: **www.soundcloud.com/ultraviolet101-1**

WordPress: **www.theartofmisbehaving.wordpress.com/**

Vaia Paziana is a visual artist, creative enabler and mentor who works in community arts settings (Certitude, Community Development) based in London. Her personal work is centred around internal conflict and restrictions and its impact on our lives. Visual arrangements vary from narrative staged observations to transforming objects into abstract images, combining analogue mixed media with digital art forms.

Paziana's page: **www.vaiapaziana.com**

Curating 'Homes of the Homeless' and Cultural Participation

Professor Jane Hamlett

As a historian, Professor Jane Hamlett is interested in ways in which her research can reach out to contemporary audiences, and how understandings of the past can be used in new and creative ways. In this short piece, she writes about her research work, how it was transformed for a public audience, and how working together with museum partners can help academics widen cultural participation in their research.

In 2010 I was awarded a large research grant by the Economic and Social Research Council for the project 'At Home in the Institution: Asylum, School and Lodging House Interiors in England, 1845-1914.' The project aimed to understand life in these Victorian institutions by exploring how they were planned, decorated, furnished and used in everyday life. Ideas of home, and the middle-class home in particular were widely celebrated in the Victorian period and these ideas and practices became important in institutional life as well. An important part of the project was to look closely at personal spaces and objects belonging to patients, school children and lodgers. We used these to try and work out how people related to the institutional world around them and to what extent it was possible to feel 'at home' in an institution, even when material provision and basic comfort were limited.

After working together with Lesley Hoskins and Rebecca Preston, the researchers on the project, for two and half years, we had amassed a lot of research material, we had written a couple of articles, edited a book together, and I had begun a monograph. We'd also carried out a series of public engagement activities with Surrey History Centre – including a pop-up exhibition and a talk that looked at the material world of Surrey's lunatic asylums in the nineteenth century. The talk had gone well, attracting a large audience including members of the local community who had worked in or had relatives living in the institutions in the talk.

Working with the museum and young people on this deep form of public engagement was a reminder of how powerful and resonant the past can be.

But we wanted to take the project's public engagement further so we approached the Geffrye Museum of the Home in Hoxton about staging a larger exhibition based on our research. As the main focus of the project, 'institutions' didn't have much popular resonance we chose to focus on an area that had been particularly productive for us – lodging houses in London. The idea behind to the exhibition was to situate lodging houses in the wider cityscape of Victoria London and to bring them alive for visitors.

The resulting exhibition 'Homes of the Homeless: Seeking Shelter in Victorian London' took visitors on a tour of the spaces and places inhabited by homeless and very poor Londoners in the nineteenth century. We explored the Victorians' growing appreciation of the problems of homelessness before looking at life on the street and rough sleeping, the small number of homeless shelters and the workhouse and casual ward (state provided spaces where people were allowed a night's shelter in poor conditions and then told to move on). We also looked at the places available to women, men and children who could scrape together a few pence for a night's stay in a common lodging house. For the slightly better off there were large scale lodging houses – established by charities and companies – like London's Rowton houses that provided shelter for thousands of men in the capital. We chose to end the exhibition by looking at the experiences of children and using some of Lesley's previous work on the history of Dr Barnados.

To create the exhibition we worked closely with the museum's curatorial team – Eleanor John and Hannah Fleming, as well as the education department and the design team. As the poor in the past often leave few material traces it was quite challenging to put the exhibition together – we were able to gather a few small key objects, such as goggles and a spittoon from a workhouse collection, and tokens from the Salvation Army that were given out in exchange for work. We also made the most of our 2D material by blowing up photographs of institutional interiors to life size, so that they confronted visitors as they made their way around. It was also important for us to make the exhibition interactive – which we did by allowing visitors to experience oakum picking (an activity often undertaken by workhouse inmates) and to try out a 'coffin bed' modelled on photographs of homeless shelters.

For us, one of the most exciting parts of the project was that alongside the work on the history exhibition the museum commissioned a collaborative public outreach project, 'What makes a home?'. The project was a collaboration between the museum and the charity New Horizon, which helps young homeless people in London today. Rachel Crofts, the Young People's Programmes Manager at the museum, ran six sessions of outreach activities with young people living in a hostel, using Victorian sources from the exhibition and encouraging the young



Home and Hope display - a collaborative project between the Geffrye Museum and the Home and New Horizon Youth Centre exploring young people's experiences of homelessness today



What Makes a Home? – project session with young people from New Horizon Youth Centre

people to produce creative responses to the sources. These were incorporated into short films, artworks and poems by the participants. The results were displayed in an exhibition 'Home and Hope' that ran alongside 'Homes of the Homeless'. Images showing the interiors of homeless shelters in the nineteenth century were particularly provocative. One illustration showing a Salvation Army Shelter with women seated at their bunks beneath the religious slogan 'Are You Ready to Die?' was especially powerful and was featured in a poem written by a young woman exploring past and present-day experiences of homelessness.

Working with the museum and young people on this deep form of public engagement was a reminder of how powerful and resonant the past can be. But this kind of cultural participation could not have been achieved by the original project research team working alone. Collaboration and teamwork with other professionals – curators, education departments and outreach teams – is essential to this kind of work. The purpose of academic research is greatly strengthened when it can reach wider and more diverse audiences – increasingly for historians this kind of collaborative work is an essential part of their working lives. Our team certainly hopes to be able to undertake more of it.

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Further reading

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Hamlett, J. 2015. *At Home in the Institution: Material Life in Asylums, Schools and Lodging Houses in Victorian and Edwardian England*. London: Palgrave.

Crafting Heritage, Wellbeing and Cultural Participation

Dr Zena Kamash

In 2016 and 2018, Dr Zena Kamash ran two public engagement projects – ‘Remembering the Romans in the Middle East and North Africa’ (‘RetRo’) and ‘Rematerialising Mosul Museum’ – that brought together arts, crafts and heritage practitioners with members of Middle Eastern and North African communities living in the UK, as well as people with an interest in these regions and their heritage.

One of the main aims of these projects was to find creative ways in which people could reconnect with their heritage and learn more about the heritage of regions that are often typified in contemporary media narratives by conflict. In particular, these projects represented a first step into investigating the links between crafting, heritage and improved well-being. In this article I will talk about some of the barriers to access that were encountered, how we tried to overcome such barriers and some of the preliminary results concerning the links between crafting, heritage and well-being.

Tackling barriers to access

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport, Arts Council England, English Heritage and Sport England ‘Taking Part’ survey has demonstrated that numerous barriers still exist for many groups to participate in cultural and sporting activities. The survey demonstrated, for example, that the majority of people both visiting museums and galleries and taking part in creative activities were well-educated professionals aged 55–74, who also had had access to such activities when young, and that museum visitors and creative activity participants are most likely to be white and unlikely to be black or Asian (Inglis and Williams 2010). In the ‘RetRo’ project, which took place in two museums – the Petrie Museum, London and the Great North Museum, Newcastle – it became apparent early on that recruitment of participants from Middle Eastern and North African backgrounds was going to be difficult at least in part because museums are not comfortable spaces for everyone. In order to increase inclusivity,

all publicity materials were bilingual in Arabic and English. At the events themselves, we – Rory Carnegie (photographer), Miranda Creswell (artist), Sarah Ekdawi (creative writing practitioner) and I – fostered a spirit of ‘gentle engagement’ by making sure that everyone participated, including us, to break down expert/non-expert barriers and created a relaxed and informal environment with, for example, baklava and tea. Several participants noted that they felt nervous to begin with, but soon settled in once they realised that they had been welcomed into a safe and relaxing space (see, for example, Muna’s reflections in Kamash et al. 2017). In the ‘Rematerialising Mosul Museum’ felting workshops, we – Karin Celestine (textile artist) and I – kept what had worked from the ‘RetRo’ project (for example the ‘gentle engagement’, the baklava) and changed the venue to Cheney School, a state secondary school in Oxford. This venue felt more inclusive, though I feel more could still be done on finding the right venue for such activities – ideally somewhere where people can drop in without needing to sign up in advance.

Crafting and heritage: a recipe for improved well-being

Two months after the ‘Rematerialising Mosul Museum’ felting workshops, I asked the participants to reflect on their experiences at the workshops with reference to the three well-being dimensions defined by the ‘What Works Centre for Wellbeing’ (What Works Wellbeing n.d.):

1. The personal dimension: confidence, self-esteem, meaning and purpose, increased optimism and reduced anxiety;
2. The cultural dimension: coping and resilience, capability and achievement, personal identity, creative skills and expression;
3. The social dimension: belonging and identity, sociability and new connections, bonding, reciprocity and reducing social inequalities.

All participants responded and all felt that their participation in the workshops has raised their well-being.¹ Several people noted that the process of the felting was in itself rhythmic and therapeutic, which echoes results from other studies (see for example The Yarnfulness Project: Yarnfulness 2018, and Stitchlinks: Riley et al. 2013). People also liked that the activity



Participants from the ‘Rematerialising Mosul Museum’ workshops at Cheney School in 2018

(felt a small panel inspired by any object of their choice from Iraq) was clearly defined, which reduced anxiety, yet also had enough scope for creativity to provide a sense of control and personal achievement. Respondent 2 commented that this combination of direction and freedom had a strong effect on them:

‘Completing the felt piece and sharing pictures of it with friends was really positive. Look, I’m someone who can create something. I made this. I am not just someone who is incapable of doing... I didn’t feel like a proper person for a while, and... doing this helped.’

That sense of pride in their final piece of work was a recurrent theme across numerous responses.

In addition to this, some participants commented on how the workshops had helped to tackle some difficult issues around identity and belonging in positive ways. Muna said:

‘I was very keen to attend [the felting workshop] as I am of Iraqi origin and have found it extremely challenging to remain optimistic in relation to long running turmoil there. There is also an all pervasive negative narrative that can come from being of Arab origin... It was also extremely important to me that my teenage son has the experience of being around positive Arabic role models and learns about Iraqi culture as a counter balance to some of the stereotypes that he will have to be able to navigate. He hides his identity all the time, even from his friends, so things like this help to ensure that he has self esteem.’

... Sharing a creative experience gives us a way in to someone else’s life and culture.

Muna also observed that having the time and space to reflect on her Iraqi identity helped her process some of the many layers of anxiety she feels. In connection with this, Rana, Deema and Yasmin noted that being able to express themselves in a non-verbal medium was ‘refreshing for our Iraqi identity.’ Furthermore, for people who did not have an Iraqi background, the workshops allowed them deeper insights in to Iraqi life and culture. Karen, for example, wrote that hearing stories from Iraqis at the workshop:

‘made me realise that this was something that although seemingly a part of daily life through the news media, that I knew nothing about beyond what I am told in the news... [The experience] made Iraq to me feel like more than just a place I hear of on the news (sort of 3d rather than 2d if you know what I mean).’

Moments of reciprocity such as this are vital elements of social well-being: broadening out understanding and encouraging a wider sense of belonging on all sides. Karin reflected on this in her response:

‘The crafts give a focus of attention and the rhythm of working means that often conversation flows more easily than when just sat together with nothing to do... The sense of community is increased, not just in the meetings of new people, but how we work together. People naturally help

each other out, offer to roll the wool, or get hot water. They work together and in that sharing, new bonds and ideas are opened up. In this workshop in particular, having people of different races, religions, backgrounds made this even more great an experience... Sharing a creative experience gives us a way in to someone else’s life and culture. The smell of a soap, triggers a conversation and a memory and an understanding that would not happen in normal interaction. That is a golden opportunity.’

Overall, then, these projects demonstrate that it is possible to create spaces and activities for wider cultural participation. Breaking down existing barriers is no easy task, but as is shown by the responses to the well-being survey, such efforts are important and significant for the people involved.

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¹ All participants providing feedback were asked whether they wish to be anonymous; where anonymity was requested, names have been redacted, otherwise participants are referred to by their first name. The respondents who have requested anonymity are referred to here as ‘Respondent x’. Several respondents self-identify as suffering from generalised anxiety with at least two being unable to work at the time of the workshops due to anxiety-related issues. Phrasing in direct quotes from respondents has been kept as in the original.

Developing inclusive history through cultural participation and engagement: remembering Partition in twenty-first-century Britain

Professor Sarah Ansari

As a historian of South Asia, Professor Sarah Ansari's research in recent years has identified common experiences and challenged deeply ingrained stereotypes – religious, ethnic, national – that dominate contemporary understandings of the recent past there. Indeed, her forthcoming monograph (Cambridge University Press, 2019), entitled *Boundaries of Belonging: localities, citizenship and rights in India and Pakistan* (co-written with William Gould from the University of Leeds), deliberately explores the post-1947 realities in two places – Uttar Pradesh and Sindh – through the same lens in order to better understand common challenges taking place on both sides of the border in the early post-independence period. In turn, Ansari's research interests have allowed her to take practical steps to use her expertise to encourage greater inclusivity when it comes to where and how South Asian history fits into British history.

Much of my effort in the last few years has centred on how best to remember what happened at the time of British India's Partition. August 1947 was a key turning-point in South Asian history that created two new states – India and Pakistan – at the cost of huge loss of life, refugee displacement and mass migration (the largest that the modern world has seen). But the end of the

centuries-old British Empire in India tends to be viewed as just a footnote in the development of the modern UK. Certainly you would get this impression from a glance at GCSE History syllabi, or a consideration of the novels and television series of recent decades. In these either the Raj or the independent modern world tends to dominate, while the moment that bridges the two receives relatively little attention. The extreme suffering that happened during this period of 'divorce' has been under-acknowledged in Britain, despite the fact that the trauma associated with it still resonates amongst British Asians today—many belong to families with roots in the Punjab and Bengal, the two provinces that were most affected by Partition. As a result, many British Asians feel that their histories have been marginalised, even though the events of Independence and Partition are arguably just as much part of British history as they belong to South Asia.

The urgency of addressing this deficit in mutual understanding meant that I have been involved in initiatives aimed at raising public understanding of the historical circumstances surrounding Partition. Over the last five years as a member of the Partition History Project (PHP), I have been part of a team that has worked with youth charities, schools and race equality think-tanks, to encourage the BBC to commission programmes to mark the 70th anniversary (2017), engaged with government ministers, and pressed GCSE examination boards to include this key twentieth-century turning point in their syllabi.

But the complexity of the human stories associated with Partition led the PHP to focus on using narrative and drama as the means of telling this history in engaging ways that stretch beyond the limitations of 'who did what to whom'. A professional theatre company Bhuchar Boulevard, supported by grants that the PHP



Child of the Divide, Polka Theatre 2017

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helped to raise from different arts funding bodies, performed a short play, 'Child of the Divide', to audiences around the UK in 2017, winning an Offie (Off West End Theatre) nomination for 'Best Production for Young People'. This play by Sudha Bhuchar and based on a short story 'Pali' by the Indian writer Bhisham Sahni, centres on the experience of a child separated from his Hindu parents at the point when they leave their home town in what is becoming Pakistan; he is taken in by a childless Muslim couple and brought up as their own son; years later his birth father comes to find him, and he returns (now a practicing Muslim) to live with his birth parents across the border in India. The complex and often unresolved tensions, which run through almost all the relationships in 'Child of the Divide', lay bare the real tragedies and pains experienced during Partition; in a really effective way, the play draws audiences into a shared experience wherein the simplicities of a defined identity are blurred. The production was backed up by educational materials for use in schools, which I helped to produce, and I also spoke with audiences about the wider history of Partition.

Breaking down barriers and increasing belonging through cultural participation

The consistent response generated by 'Child of the Divide' – in effect using drama as the way to talk about Partition – was that it helped to heal divisions by highlighting the shared experiences involved and underlining why this episode represents an intrinsic part of broader twentieth-century British history. The potential of Partition commemoration to promote inclusivity was also underlined by an interactive oral history community project conducted by a Slough-based youth organisation (Aik Saath) which I advised. The young people involved collected first-hand testimonies about Partition from women belonging to different communities currently living in the town, and mounted a well-received local exhibition in August 2017.

Based on my role in the PHP, I was approached in 2018 to co-lead a 'Partition Education Panel' (composed of educators and heritage experts) as part of a wider national project (the Partition Commemoration Campaign or PCC) to lobby for the inclusion of Partition in school curricula. This initiative was spearheaded by the relatives of Partition survivors, including some whose family stories had been featured in BBC documentaries about Partition the previous summer (2017). Backed by a cross-party groups of MPs, its aim is to secure support for an annual UK Partition Commemoration Day (possibly 17 August, the day in 1947 when the new boundaries were announced separating 'India'



and 'Pakistan'), along the same lines as Holocaust Memorial Day or the more recently-instituted Windrush Day. At the time of writing there has been an ongoing programme of CCP roundtable events held in London and Manchester, supported by MPs and community activists from across the political spectrum and belonging to a range of different British backgrounds. The initiative reinforces the potential of historical understanding to break down barriers and generate opportunities for greater participation and belonging. 2019 sees the UK's first South Asia Heritage Month (18 July-17 August), a spin-off initiative being driven by the PCC in association with the Faiths Forum for London, The Grand Trunk Road Project, Manchester Museum and a number of other organisations.

With another key anniversary looming (the 75th anniversary of Partition in 2022), we hope that significant progress will have been made by then as far as embedding its history in the wider public consciousness in Britain is concerned. After all, Partition recently featured in an episode of 'Dr Who', something that would have been inconceivable before the coverage of its 70th anniversary the previous year!

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Audio Description in the Art Gallery

Professor Hannah Thompson

Art galleries are notoriously visual spaces. Works of art are displayed on walls or in cabinets and visitors are invited to look at them from a distance. There is a hushed and respectful atmosphere and barriers and panes of glass stop us from getting too close to precious artefacts. The instruction ‘Do Not Touch’ is everywhere.

Most art galleries are aware that this kind of visual display is inaccessible to blind people. With help from charities like VocalEyes or the RNIB, they are increasingly organising audio described and tactile tours and frequently produce large-print, Braille or audio resources to accompany their most popular pictures.

Whilst these kinds of access initiatives are certainly a step in the right direction, they take time and money that galleries do not always have. In addition, they isolate or marginalise blind people by obliging them to book their visits in advance, to use materials not available to their sighted companions or to attend at odd or inconvenient times. The art gallery remains a primarily visual space to which non-visual visitors are given limited access only if resources and staffing permit.

Once all the arrangements have been put in place by gallery and visitor, the audio-described or tactile tour can be a deeply enriching experience. As well as describing art works in memorable detail, guides often evoke senses other than sight. They use references to touch, sound and even smell to create a wonderfully immersive experience which can really bring a picture to life.

But this privileged access to art is the exception rather than the rule. It is an accessibility service offered only to those people who do not relate to art using traditional visual means. It is offered with the implicit understanding that it is second-best: art should be perceived visually but when this essential sense is missing, audio-described and tactile tours can step in to offer some compensation. This belief assumes that sight is positioned at the top of the hierarchy of the senses. But this is not necessarily the case. My research asks what would happen to the gallery experience if all visitors were given access to the kind of multi-sensory approach usually saved for blind people.

It soon became clear that the multisensory experience was both more enjoyable and more instructive than looking at a painting in a traditionally visual way.

I have developed the concept of ‘blindness gain’ to argue that audio-described and touch tours can be of benefit to all kinds of people. Rather than being a poor substitute for visual access, these tours are in fact a more fitting and memorable way for everyone to experience art. To test this theory my research group asked a range of sighted people to experience one of the most famous pictures in Royal Holloway’s Picture Gallery, Edwin Henry Landseer’s 1864 painting *Man Proposes, God Disposes*, in a variety of ways.

The first group simply looked at the painting as they would any work displayed in a traditional gallery setting. The second group looked at the painting whilst listening to an audio description of it originally designed for a visually impaired audience. The third group were given a multi-sensory experience of the painting. To achieve this, the painting was framed by two display boards which were covered in white sheets to create an arctic setting. There was a table in front of the painting covered in fake snow blankets, fur carpets, acrylic ice, fake bones and a telescope. On the floor in front of the table was another faux fur blanket to represent the polar bears: participants were able to remove footwear and stand on this carpet whilst participating in the study. A fan underneath the table gave a sense of cold weather whilst two scent boxes placed on the table evoked a sense of ‘shipwreck’ and ‘rotten flesh’. Participants could also touch wooden masts, wound with rope and entwined with a small, torn ensign flag. Finally, the audio description used for the multisensory experience was enhanced with sound effects such as howling wind, roaring polar bears and crashing waves. Participants were able to interact with the multisensory experience by picking up the props, touching the materials and smelling the scents whilst they viewed the painting and listened to the audio.

All participants completed a questionnaire after their visit and were also able to discuss their experiences with a researcher. It soon became clear that the multisensory experience was both more enjoyable and more instructive than looking at a painting in a traditionally visual way. Participants felt more involved in the painting and more able to appreciate its different elements. The gallery visit became an exciting, imaginative and active engagement with a picture rather than a passive, silent, distance experience.

I hope that the data collected during this small-scale trial will encourage galleries to think more creatively about how they display their artworks. It provides clear evidence that the kind of multisensory experiences found in audio-described and tactile tours usually only provided for blind and partially blind visitors can in fact enhance the gallery experience of all visitors.

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Enhancing the gallery experience in Royal Holloway's Picture Gallery



Interdisciplinarity in the Classroom

Professor Giuliana Pieri

Over the past five years, Professor Giuliana Pieri has lead a number of projects with schools, teachers, and teachers' associations, which have brought together different disciplines: Modern Languages, History, Art History, and Design. The collaborative projects involved masterclasses in schools, workshops with teachers, presentations at academic and teachers' conferences, exhibitions, creative sessions, blog posts by teachers and students, and creative thinking labs.

The premise was simple: I wanted to facilitate a dialogue between students of different disciplines and test out what happens when we are actively encouraged to cross the boundaries of our disciplines. Would this dialogue create more questions? Would it give us more answers to the same questions? Would we end up looking over the fence of our own disciplines more often as a result of these cross-disciplinary encounters?



Tate Exchange 2017

A test case: Interdisciplinary Futurism

Interdisciplinary Futurism focused on the Italian first Avant-Garde, an eminently interdisciplinary movement, and brought together different schools and students from different subject areas. It culminated in a pop-up event at Tate Modern in February 2017. We were invited to curate a session at Tate Exchange, a place that programmatically is 'for all to play, create, reflect and question what art can mean to our everyday', and we have been back annually, expanding the remit of the project to include more schools and more disciplines. Our aim was, and still remains, to explore in practice possible models of interdisciplinary exchange between universities and secondary schools, and between different disciplines in schools. The focus on a common topic—Italian Futurism—allowed the students and teachers involved to work on an existing topic in the curriculum, explore it further with the aid of student-led research and academic masterclasses, and, in the process, begin to understand the way in which their respective disciplines articulate and shape knowledge. Whilst we did not want to dismantle disciplinary knowledge, our idea was to make students aware of how their own disciplinary frameworks frame and shape how they approach a topic of study.

The students who took part in this project had been studying Italian Futurism from a multiplicity of perspectives and for different reasons.

- Historians from The Sixth Form College Farnborough encounter Futurism when they study the roots of Italian nationalism and the rise of the Fascist movement in the wider context of European History, 1900–1957.
- Students of Art History at Queen Margaret's School engage with Futurism when they study early twentieth-century Avant-Garde movements.
- Students at Royal Holloway in the School of Modern Languages, Literatures and Cultures, encounter Futurism in their study of Fascist Italy, and at specialist final year level in a course on European art and culture in the period between 1880–1940.
- Design students at Farnborough draw on the rich tradition of European Modernism within design history and were responsible for the visual identity of the event, designing posters and booklets which accompanied our pop-up exhibition and creative visual poetry session.

Learning through 'playful' cultural participation

The project incorporated traditional transmissive teaching: the teachers continued to teach their lessons on Futurism as usual; and I delivered lectures and seminars in schools. Yet the focus on student-led projects and group work before and during the event at Tate Exchange meant that the emphasis shifted towards independent, critically-engaged learning. The students took centre stage as knowledge-holders and co-creators: we acknowledged from the start the importance of their disciplinary competencies and encouraged them to share their disciplinary expertise with other students to stretch their knowledge further.

Tate Exchange offered us a forum for discussion, and a physical space in which we could exchange ideas and perspectives. Most importantly, being in a space which is purpose-built for an interactive and creative use, helped to create an active learning space that invited a more playful approach to learning. Galleries and museums all around the country offer similar spaces for creative interaction, so there is no need for an illustrious institution in your back garden to run a similar project.



Space and creativity: play and playfulness

One of the most unexpected and joyous results of Interdisciplinary Futurism has been the rediscovery of the role of the creative arts outside the confines of the art classroom. Students were tasked with creating a pop-up exhibition of Futurist artworks and took part in a creative session in which they made their own Futurist visual poetry which they then exhibited alongside reproductions of Futurist paintings and sculptures.

Play has a fundamental role in cognitive development and learning. Yet it is left behind at the primary school gates and its relevance is all but lost at secondary and higher education level. Yet, 'a playful approach towards learning and knowledge can facilitate ontological change within students. Such change is pivotal in assisting students to transcend normative disciplinary boundaries' (Rice 2009).

An interdisciplinary approach combined with creative sessions invites collaboration, co-production of knowledge, knowledge exchange, play, and curiosity. It is less hierarchical, more focused on project and group work and on creating a sense of shared endeavor and community. It engenders more active participation and works especially well when the spaces in which it is enacted are themselves hybrid spaces, constructed for an exploratory and creative use.

The premise was simple: I wanted to facilitate a dialogue between students of different disciplines and test out what happens when we are actively encouraged to cross the boundaries of our disciplines.

Thinking outside the disciplinary box

Italian architect and designer Ettore Sottsass (1917–2007), in 1954, observed: 'when Charles Eames designs his chair, he does not design just a chair. He designs a way of sitting down. He designs a function, not for a function'. This play on the Modernist principle of 'form follows function' may have something to teach those of us interested in interdisciplinary work. I like to think of our disciplines as chairs, designed to make us sit in particular ways. Disciplines offer a scaffold to our knowledge, but can end up dictating, to a large extent, the way we 'sit down'.

The way I conceive of interdisciplinarity is as an exploratory space in-between the disciplines, in which we experience different ways of sitting/thinking. We may still find one 'chair' that is just right for us, but we are made aware of other ways of seeing, framing, and interpreting.

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