



# WILD WILD WOMEN

**Ten Years of Intergenerational Arts Practice at The Women's Library led by Magic Me in collaboration with Mulberry School for Girls and local, older women.**

Sue Mayo and Dr Caoimhe McAvinchey



## About the project partners

From 2004 to 2013 Magic Me worked in partnership with Mulberry School for Girls, The Women's Library and older women living in east London to create a unique series of ten annual projects, described in this report. All three organisations were based in Tower Hamlets until January 2013, when The Women's Library moved to Holborn, central London.



### Magic Me

Magic Me is the UK's leading provider of intergenerational arts projects. Our intergenerational groups, young people aged 8+ and older people 60+, meet weekly, in schools, museums, older people's clubs, care homes, community or cultural organisations.

Projects are led by our team of freelance creative artists: musicians, visual artists, photographers, filmmakers, writers and drama specialists. Activities bring together people of different ages, and often also diverse cultures, ethnicities and faiths. Magic Me reaches 600+ local people each year and many more nationally and internationally through research, consultancy and training.

[www.magicme.co.uk](http://www.magicme.co.uk)



### Mulberry School for Girls

Mulberry School for Girls is a high-achieving, over-subscribed, comprehensive school in Tower Hamlets which was judged to be Outstanding by Ofsted in 2013. Our aim is to develop confidence, creativity, leadership and a love of learning in our young women.

Mulberry is a Specialist Arts School and is currently in residence at Southbank Centre. We provide many extra-curricular learning programmes, including Women's Education and Global Education. The school plays an active part in our local community and we recently launched the Mulberry and Bigland Green Centre to provide more facilities for parents' learning.

[www.mulberry.towerhamlets.sch.uk](http://www.mulberry.towerhamlets.sch.uk)



### The Women's Library

The Women's Library @ LSE is Europe's largest collection of material relating to the lives of women and a key part of British heritage. The collections document all aspects of women's lives, with a particular emphasis on the lives of women in the UK and the great political, economic and social changes of the past 150 years. LSE took custodianship of The Women's Library from London Metropolitan University in 2013.

The print collections include over 60,000 books and pamphlets and 3,000 periodical titles. The archive and museum collections include over 500 archives and 5,000 museum objects, including photographs, posters, badges, banners, textiles and ceramics.

[www.lse.ac.uk/library](http://www.lse.ac.uk/library)

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**2004 – 2013**

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## **WILD WILD WOMEN**

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## **Preface**

This report describes and examines a series of ten annual arts projects led by Magic Me from 2004 to 2013. Each took place at The Women's Library, in collaboration with Mulberry School for Girls and local, older women. The report is in three parts:

### **Introduction by Susan Langford, Director, Magic Me**

This section describes briefly the range of work and the practice of Magic Me in 2003, when the collaboration with The Women's Library was developed. It then outlines changes and developments over the decade of annual projects and what it took to make each project happen successfully.

### **The Projects by Sue Mayo, Associate Artist, Magic Me**

This is an account by Sue Mayo, lead artist for the series of Magic Me projects at The Women's Library. Sue describes the background and aims of the series and then details each of the ten projects: the theme, materials from the Library collections used by the group, the artforms and artists, the participants and the outcomes. She discusses some of the challenges and changes that the artists and the participants worked with during the lifetime of the projects. The projects, project artists and participants are also listed overleaf.

### **Research report by Dr Caoimhe McAvinchey, Queen Mary, University of London**

Caoimhe outlines the rationale for the research, the changing local and global contexts for the projects and the partners involved. Informed by observation and analyses of live work, archive materials and interviews with artists, participants and key partner staff, the report identifies characteristics of successful intergenerational arts practice that may be applied in different cultural collections contexts. The report addresses three specific questions that run across the decade of partnerships and practice:

What are the characteristics of the artists' approach in The Women's Library projects?

What are the possibilities offered through intergenerational arts practice in a library or heritage context?

What is particular about working with women-only intergenerational groups?



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## The 10 Projects and the Project Artists



### 2004 Beauty?

Women, image and identity

#### Artists

Sue Mayo (Performance Skills), Anita McKenzie (Photography), Leah Thorn (Spoken Word Artist)



### 2005 Spinning Plates

Women's relationship to the home

#### Artists

Frances Kearney (Photography), Sue Mayo (Creative Writing)



### 2006 Heartfelt

Protest: What would we all march for now?

#### Artists

Cath Goldstein (Sculptor), Sue Mayo (Spoken Word), Surya Turner (Storytelling)



### 2007 Soundtracks

Women's Voice

#### Artists

Sue Mayo (Creative Writing), Leah Thorn (Spoken Word Artist), Jules Wilkinson (Sound Artist), Lore Windermuth (Additional Sound Recordist)



### 2008 Can I? I Can!

Being the first woman to do something, and doing something for the first time

#### Artists

Polly Beestone (Visual Art and Craft), Sue Mayo (Creative Writing), Anita McKenzie (Photography)



## 2009 Utopia according to me

Utopia

### Artists

Polly Beestone (Installation), Sue Mayo (Performance), Anita McKenzie (Photography)



## 2010 Dressing Up!

Women's relationship with our clothes

### Artists

Polly Beestone (Costume), Sue Mayo (Direction), Surya Turner (Text), Auriol Ramsay (Guest artist, dressing up clothes)



## 2011 Moving Lives

How do women archive, knowingly and unknowingly, their lives?

### Artists

Sue Mayo (Creative Writing), Ellie Rees (Visual Artist/Film)



## 2012 Where the Heart is

Love and place

### Artists

Sue Mayo (Text and Direction), Lesley Pinder (Film), Jules Wilkinson (Sound)



## 2013 Wild Wild Women

Women who cause a stir to make a difference

### Artists

Polly Beestone (Puppetry), Sue Mayo (Performance), Zoe Palmer (Guest Artist, Song)

## WILD, WILD WOMEN

### Samilah Naira, Mulberry School for Girls, project participant 2013

Magic Me is a project where a few year 9 students get to work with older women in the community to create a piece of work around a title. This year the title was 'Wild, Wild Women.' Of course most of us were confused when Sue and Polly sat down with us with tea and biscuits to talk. It wasn't like a normal drama production where you're up on your feet working. It was different.

When we saw the older women at first we were reluctant to talk to them but once we started we couldn't stop. They weren't reserved old grannies who wanted nothing to do with us, quite the opposite. They were just like us. Maybe a tiny, tiny bit older – ok, they were in their 60-80s. They were old but soon enough age just became a number.

They talked to us, really talked to us. We found ourselves being enchanted by their stories. If anything it was a surprise they trusted us with so much. With every word they said we realised how lucky we were to even get the opportunity to even meet them. They had done it all. Our worlds that barely stretched past East London grew.

*We met some of the  
most amazing women  
in the world.*

When joining a club most people think it's just about the credit of joining it, another thing to add to their CVs, but Magic Me was a place we could just sit down and talk. Our words became the base of our drama production and our friendship became the ties that pulled the whole thing together. Magic Me wasn't just a club, it was a place where we were free to talk without any restrictions, it was where our voices were heard without any reluctance and it was where we met some of the most amazing women in the world. I'll tell you now, you'll never meet anyone like those women anywhere else. They really are the gems hidden away behind the old, cranky, stereotypical grandmas we all imagine.

To the next year's Magic Me group, what type of tea do you like?

Prepare for tea, biscuits and some of the most amazing, wild, wild women you'll ever come across.

Article published in *The Berry Bugle*,  
student newspaper of Mulberry School for Girls,  
Autumn 2013.





## The Project Participants

### 2004 Beauty

Marga Bell,  
Marion Davies, Sally Flood,  
Jaqueline Guiver, Pia Khan,  
Marie Posner

Habiba Begum Ali, Nilu Begum Ali,  
Amina Begum Uddin, Ovi Chowdry,  
Rupsana Khanom,  
Shafa Akthar Udin



### 2005 SpinningPlates

Marion Davies, Gina Dell,  
Sally Flood, Mary Maxwell,  
Jean Nader, Rachel Ogunleye,  
Marie Posner

Anwara (Aysha) Begum, Raziah Begum,  
Rubina Begum, Selina Begum,  
Syeda Nazma Begum, Fojia Sultana,  
Nipah Jobbar, Forida Khanim,  
Salmina Sultana,  
Mauma Tahmina



### 2006 Heartfelt

Marion Davies, Sally Flood,  
Joanna Judge, Mary Maxwell,  
Rachel Ogunleye, Marie Posner

Tahmina Akthar, Jaheeda Begum,  
Khalida Begum, Rujina Begum,  
Shazna Begum, Khadija Khanom,  
Salma Khanom, Muhiban Nessa,  
Nazia Rahman



### 2007 Soundtracks

Pat Charnock, Marie Crawly,  
Marion Davies, Sally Flood,  
Joanna Judge, Mary Maxwell,  
Rachel Ogunleye, Roberta Stewart

Nazifa Akthar, Ruhana Akthar,  
Saniya Akthar, Tasmin Akther,  
Fahima Begum, Masuma Siddiquah,  
Ishrat Zakia Uddin,  
Farhana Yasmin

### 2008 Can I? I Can!

Marion Davies, Sally Flood,  
Joanna Judge, Joy Lee,  
Mary Maxwell, Rachel Ogunleye,  
Winnie Roach, Roberta Stewart

Layla Adam, Rujina Begum,  
Fatima Hashi, Munirum Nessa,  
Sana Shafiq





## 2009 Utopia, according to me

Marion Davies, Sally Flood,  
Joanna Judge, Rita Lewis,  
Rachel Ogunleye, Winnie Roach,  
Gita Sarkar, Kate Scannell  
Roberta Stewart

Rubia Begum, Tanzila Ishrath  
Amrina Jahan, Sajida Nessa  
Marium Uddin



## 2010 Dressing Up

Joanna Judge, Rita Lewis,  
Rachel Ogunleye, Winnie Roach,  
Gita Sarkar, Kate Scannell,  
Roberta Stewart

Amena Ahmed, Sayema Ahmed,  
Samiah Begum, Anesa Butt,  
Hamida Khatun, Abida Khanom,  
Jasmin Nahar



## 2011 Moving Lives

Marion Davies,  
Rachel Ogunleye, Winnie Roach,  
Ros Tankard, Gita Sarkar,  
Roberta Stewart

Fahmida Begum, Farmiha Chowdury  
Anisa Islam, Shamima Latif  
Meryam Moujdi, Labiba Mustari  
Fahmida Naznin,  
Zaaidah Yasmin



## 2012 Where the Heart is

Marion Davies, Joanna Judge,  
Rachel Ogunleye, Alma Ramnauth,  
Winnie Roach, Gita Sarkar,  
Roberta Stewart

Afsana Begum, Jusna Begum,  
Sumayya Begum, Anita Farhat,  
Rifat Hoque, Nusrat Nadia,  
Atiya Rahman

## 2013 Wild Wild Women

Sally Flood, Joanna Judge  
Rachel Ogunleye, Henrietta Onipede  
Winnie Roach, Roberta Stewart  
Gita Sarkar

Shania Akther, Sadiya Hussien,  
Kinza Javaid, Fareha Miah,  
Samilah Naira, Almitra Simpson,  
Rohima Sultana,  
Nowshin Sweety



## Introduction

### Susan Langford, Director, Magic Me

In 2003 Magic Me was already established as a leader in the rapidly growing field of intergenerational arts practice. Founded in 1989, the charity had developed a successful model of working in partnership with schools and older people's organisations, to run arts projects that helped young and older people meet and work together.

Each basic, term-long project brought together 10 children or young people and 10 older people, every week for 90 minutes. Working with Magic Me creative artists, around a chosen theme, each group would learn and share arts skills, exchange ideas and experiences, and create something together. Groups varied widely and so did the artworks they made. Working in care homes, with people with dementia, the focus was often on the weekly shared music-making or painting; family and friends might be invited to a workshop to see the group in action. Other projects reached out to a wider audience, with a performance in a school assembly, a specially planned Magic Me event or local community festival.

As awareness of Magic Me grew requests for new projects developed, coming from schools, care homes, day centres and other partners. The basic model developed, adding after-school and holiday workshops, so young people could carry on meeting with their older friends when school projects ended. Some projects ran over two terms, allowing for deeper engagement and learning. All projects included time for participants to reflect on what they were learning, supporting young people and adults to appreciate their progress, grow in confidence and hone their communication skills.

*Sharing the Experience* our handbook on 'how to set up and run arts projects linking young and older people' was published in 2001, growing out of a three year programme of intergenerational projects in Tower Hamlets. During the programme we had worked with many new arts partners, including the National Portrait Gallery, Cloth of Gold and Oxford House, and deliberately built relationships with different local communities, including Somali and Bangladeshi elders groups, to examine the ingredients of successful intergenerational arts projects – what was always essential and what was variable, more dependent on the setting, age or life stage of participants, cultural mix or artform? Writing the book together, Sue Mayo, long-time project artist at Magic Me, and I had crystallised the learning and practices developed since the organisation's first pilot project 10 years before.

In 2003 further initiatives included arts projects within the 10 year New Deal for Communities regeneration programme on the Ocean Estate in Stepney and a project with Age Concern Tower Hamlets, bringing artists and volunteers to work with isolated, individual older people, on arts projects in their own homes.

In 2003 we had recruited new artists to join our pool of freelancers, contracted to work on projects, and with them needed to establish a shared understanding of Magic Me's approach and how they might apply it across a wide range of types of project and intergenerational meeting place. With support from Grants for the Arts, we designed and ran a three year programme of Continuing Professional Development days for Magic Me's pool of freelance artists starting in January 2004.

Keen to find new partners, I was excited when Sue suggested the idea of working with The Women's Library, a new public venue, to create a women-only intergenerational project. Housing a long-established collection of objects, books, periodicals and research on the lives of women in the UK, the Library had recently moved into a new, purpose built home, a converted wash house, just off Petticoat Lane in Aldgate. When Sue contacted Mulberry School for Girls, a recent partner on a different project, and got a positive response, a three-way partnership was begun.

*We had no idea, nor did we plan, that in 2013 we would be looking back on 10 annual projects; the success of the initial project led to another and the ideas kept coming for new ones.*

The partners were within walking distance of one another, and the neighbourhood within that geographical triangle was both the backdrop and a vital, active participant in the projects that followed. In 2004 we ran the first project, *Beauty?* to complement the Library's public exhibition: *Beauty Queens: Smiles, Swimsuits and Sabotage*. The participating group made large photos exhibited in the Library entrance and gave a performance at the exhibition's private view.

We had no idea, nor did we plan, that in 2013 we would be looking back on 10 annual projects; the success of the initial project led to another and the ideas kept coming for new ones.

From the outset we decided to design a project for individual older women meeting with school students at The Women's Library, after-school from 4pm and during the school Easter holidays. We had to work hard to recruit our first seven older participants (our aim was eight) drawing on existing community contacts and local media.

During this period we were also establishing new systems and ways of working, to cater properly for participants who met only for a Magic Me project once a week. When we worked with established groups, an Activities Organiser or club leader liaised with everyone, and provided back up if there was an emergency. Now we needed to have our own procedures in place.

Older participants contacted the Magic Me office for advice about issues or worries beyond the project, or when they were low and needed a friendly

person to chat to. We provided a listening ear and developed our knowledge of services to refer people to. Early on we established a policy of paying taxi fares for those women who needed more than public transport; local mini-cab firms became part of the backstage team.

Though a new group of students joined each project, some older women began to return every year and staff and artists developed a new kind of relationship with them, in some cases over eight or ten years. Some participants have become skilled and enthusiastic ambassadors for Magic Me, speaking about, or presenting their work at, conferences and events about the projects, and meetings with potential funders.

Themes and ideas for projects grew from conversations with participants, discoveries in the Library shelves, or from more formal meetings with the Library staff, who had a wealth of knowledge of the collection.

The series of projects, as both Sue and Caoimhe note in this report, was remarkable and different within the life of Magic Me over the ten years. Each project was devised and led by Sue and she provided a key strand of continuity; there were always changes to accommodate and renegotiate each year. The staff structure and individuals at the Library changed almost annually, including changes in Director; we had three different project contacts at the School, and in 2006 a new Headteacher joined. We are grateful for all the support so many colleagues, nearly all women, gave to the projects.

Sue was adept at spotting the germ of an idea and growing it over weeks or months, through talking to the participants, School or Library staff and Magic Me artists. Her vision and creativity, combined with a real curiosity about people and what makes them tick, were at the heart of the success of these projects. She set a tone and a high standard for what each group could achieve in a relatively short period of time. Women artists in our freelance pool were always keen to be part of the next project, and many returned for a second or third project, depending on the artforms required. These artists were skilled in their chosen art forms whether photography, spoken or written word, sculpture, video or sound recording. Many also brought to the projects experience of facilitating women's groups, or cross-cultural projects and their own life experiences as women, some as mothers and one as a grandmother.

In 2005 Sue Mayo suggested recruiting a volunteer to support the activities during the two day Easter workshop. From 2008 a project volunteer became a key person in each project, providing very practical support with refreshments, materials and petty cash, but also bringing to the workshops arts practice skills in drama and performance and her own ideas about the project theme. Many volunteers were graduates of the MA Applied Theatre course at Goldsmiths, University of London, where Sue was now teaching.

From 2009 we began to host a tea party for our audience, part of the end of project sharing of work, and the volunteer team grew for those events, to fill the teapots and arrange the cakes. By 2012, when *Where the Heart is*, that year's project was presented as part of LIFT (London International Festival of Theatre) our ambitions had grown. The participating group created soundtracks, short videos and a map printed on a handkerchief, to guide our audiences on walks around the local area. With two days of walks and many locations to manage, we recruited a production manager and booked the East End Women's Institute to bake us hundreds of delicious cakes. A longterm ambition was achieved that year, when *Heart* was featured on Woman's Hour, on BBC Radio 4.

After about three years the project became part of the Magic Me calendar. The regulars amongst the older women would say 'next year we might...' and their expectation of another project, fuelled my work to secure the necessary funding. It has been a challenge at times to raise funds *again*, for a project with a relatively small group of immediate participants, sometimes it felt, reaching out for next year's money before this year's project had ended. From year two Mulberry School contributed financially to each project budget, one year stepping in with over £7,000 when all other bids failed. We are indebted to the local trusts and foundations, Awards for All Lottery, London borough of Tower Hamlets and other funders who made possible one or more projects; many supported two or more.

In 2009 we began to make longer term bids, but it was only in 2011 that we were successful. Our Grants for the Arts bid, for a two year programme of projects and research, included Women's Library projects in 2012 and 13 and this research project. We were thrilled that we would be able to deliberately document and examine the body of work that had already grown up, and would be in its tenth year by 2013. Our aim was not to evaluate the projects against our agreed aims, this we had done year by year, but to examine what we had learned, by creating a series of projects over time, each building on the previous ones. We appointed Dr Caoimhe McAvinchey, of Queen Mary, University of London, long-term partner of Magic Me, to explore the learning of the past decade.

*The regulars amongst the older women would say 'next year we might...'*

Having achieved two year funding in late 2011, it was a particular blow, when in March 2012 we heard the news that London Metropolitan University, who had hosted the Library for ten years, had decided they no longer wished to manage the collection and were putting it out to tender. The older women in particular were hard hit, with the Magic Me project at the Library now a well-established key part of their lives. Having learned all about campaigning from the Suffragettes and other women in the Library over the years, they now went into action with letters published in the local press and the Guardian, part of a much wider campaign to keep the building, the staff

and the collection together. However this was not to be, and from January 2013 the LSE became the manager of the collection; it is now held as The Women's Library@ LSE in Holborn.

Our 10<sup>th</sup> project became the last in this series. The final performance *Wild, Wild Women* was presented at the nearby Kobi Nazrul Centre on 1<sup>st</sup> May 2013, the Library having closed to the public in March.

Like us, LSE Library staff recognize the amazing potential of the collection to inspire public audiences as well as students and academics, and have invited Magic Me to work with them on new project ideas. The LSE is too far for our Tower Hamlets participants to travel on a weekly basis in rush hour, so we will not transfer our regular project there. At the time of writing in August 2013 we are exploring possible new venues in the Borough, aiming to run a women only project locally next Spring.

Undertaking this research and writing this report has enabled us to examine in detail what has made these projects work so well, and to take this learning into the future model, whatever it grows to be. I want to put on record my thanks to Sue Mayo for her constant leadership of this series, over the ten years. I thank her and all those who have contributed, as participants, artists, volunteers, staff and partners, for their creativity, ideas, energy and commitment which have made this rich strand of Magic Me's work possible.

Page opposite: *Totems from the performance of Wild, Wild Women*



# THE PROJECTS

## Sue Mayo, Lead Artist

In 2002 I picked up a leaflet advertising the opening of the new Women's Library, in a building in Old Castle Street, just behind Aldgate East Station. The old washhouses had been converted, with the help of a Heritage Lottery Fund grant, into a purpose built home for what was already a significant collection of Women's History. As part of what became London Metropolitan University, the new building had a large Reading Room, exhibition and seminar spaces, a café and an education room. Not long after this, Magic Me, for whom I had worked over many years as a freelance artist, asked if I had any ideas for new ways of working, or new projects. The Women's Library came to mind, and I went to visit the Education Officer there to speak about the possibility of an intergenerational arts project that was just for women.

What was then new to Magic Me's ways of working was both the site – a public Library and exhibition space – and the idea of working with a single gender group. For The Women's Library, at this early stage in its presence in the area, this project provided an opportunity to make relationships with local older women and a local school. While its remit was national, some of the staff members at The Women's Library were also keen to make sure it had an East London presence. Once the idea had been agreed in principle, we invited Mulberry School for Girls, which was within walking distance of The Women's Library, to be our partner organisation and later recruited local older women to join the project.

Writing this summary of the projects Magic Me undertook at The Women's Library offers a perspective that allows me to look at patterns and development over the ten years, but it is crucial to bear in mind that this was not our plan at the outset. Having initially thought that the project would be a one off, we planned one more when we saw what a fruitful partnership with participants and organisations was emerging. We then planned and fund-raised just one year ahead for each project, with no absolute assurance that we would be able to continue. In the fourth year, when it seemed that the partnership with The Women's Library might not continue, we took stock, and began to recognise that this project had a longer life, and participants who were beginning to count on it as part of their experience.

In that first year we had not imagined that many of the adults involved would stay involved. The fact that we were able to continue to work in the same place with the same partners allowed longer-term involvement. Two women have been part of eight projects, and others are not far behind. During this time we developed a close relationship with Mulberry School for Girls, becoming an Arts Partner when they sought and achieved Performing Arts Specialist Status.

The developments that I will be tracking will include the circumstantial and accidental, as well as the purposeful and intended. One example of this is the tradition that we grew of holding a tea party with our audience in connection with our final event. This began in 2009, when our end of project performance

was in the Reading Room. We wanted a chance for the audience to meet the participating group. Coincidentally the café was no longer functioning commercially and became available to us, so we set up tables in there and hosted a tea party after the performance. We saw immediately how confidently the group engaged their audience in discussions about Utopia, and, over the subsequent years, developed the tea party as an intrinsic part of the final event; a very distinct part of our aesthetic and our values.

## Our Aims

From the beginning we wanted to bring together teenage girls with older women who lived locally. The rich resources of the Library were to provide a central point of reference and inspiration, to enable the whole group to reflect on their lives as women in East London. The demographic of the area brought us a group of predominantly Bangladeshi origin young women, and a group of older women who were a mixture of White UK, White Jewish UK, Black African, African Caribbean and Asian, with a wide age range, from late 50s to early 90s.

Themes for each of the annual projects were decided both with The Women's Library, relating to current or upcoming exhibitions, or items in the collection, and also by listening out for what the group seemed to be wanting to talk about, and finding materials that would enable them to explore further. I worked across all ten projects as lead artist, bringing in other experienced artists from a variety of art forms, many of them for several projects.

The timing agreed for the projects was purely practical. We wanted to meet after school, as this was the best way of enabling the young women to be able to come to The Women's Library. For all the women this was best done at the time of the year when it would be light until at least 6 pm. We needed to avoid the School exams in May and June, and Ramadan, which fell in the autumn that first year. Therefore all projects ran weekly from mid February, usually through to May, although some reconvened in September when our creative work was going to be presented at the launch of a new Exhibition at The Women's Library.

All the projects worked with four key aims. One of these was **the building of relationships**, challenging assumptions the women might have about each other and exploring the common ground. The second was **exploring the chosen theme**, through contact with resources from The Women's Library, including published texts, diaries, magazines, posters and postcards. The theme was further explored through exploratory creative activities, and through discussion, sharing experiences and debate. The third strand was the **development of skills**. These skills might be in writing, performing, editing, or photography, in the analysis of a photographic image or the construction of a campaigning one. There were different modes of learning, with some clearly 'Taught' skills, and others learned as part of the process, guided by the artist, or learning from each other. There

were also skills to be learned in terms of working collaboratively, and working in a group. The kind of skills we wanted to learn in these areas were often shaped by a group agreement, written by each group for itself at the start of a project, which expressed the group's desires to work in ways that were respectful of the ideas of others, gave everyone space and addressed particular concerns, like the use of mobile phones. On some projects these were never referred to again, and on others it was really useful to be able to remind individuals or the whole group about what they had agreed, or to agree to change something. The fourth aim was the **sharing of work with a wider audience**. All the projects worked towards arts products, an important opportunity for the group to shape and pass on to an audience what they had been exploring and shaping. There were many discussions, some heated, about what would go in and what would stay out of the final performance or exhibition, as we learned to think about our audience. Our ambition was always to aim for work that was well edited, rehearsed, made or displayed. The most challenging of all was live performance, when we often felt that rehearsal time, the time spent after the work was edited and shaped, had not been enough to enable the group to perform confidently enough. Time allocated for rehearsal often got absorbed into the process of making and creating the work. A counterbalance to this was the positive impact of the experience of live performance for the group, and their enjoyment of direct contact with their audience.

The four aims identified above were not separate and parallel, but often intertwined, and all equally important.

Our audience was often built mainly on friends and family, and people with a particular interest in Magic Me, in Mulberry School for Girls or The Women's Library, in intergenerational work or in the artists. A small audience was often the most appropriate, in order to allow dialogue between the group and the audience pre or post the final event. The audience widened when we coincided with Exhibition openings at The Women's Library, and when we were part of LIFT 2012, but also because there was a growing interest in the projects as we built up a body of work.

## The format

The projects generally followed a similar pattern each year. In February, the artists met the young and the older women separately at the start of the project, which provided participants with an opportunity to get to know one another, and also to think about what they were hoping for and expecting, and explore any anxieties they might have about meeting the other group. Intergenerational sessions then took place at the Library, after school, from 4 – 5.30pm, with the older people generally arriving half an hour earlier to have a cup of tea. More concentrated time together was built in to the Easter holidays, with two or three day-long workshops, when the group could really

immerse themselves in making, rehearsing, taking photographs, filming, etc. We then went back to weekly after school workshops until the performance or exhibition, when sessions might be focused entirely on preparations for the event. After this culmination of the project we would meet again to reflect on and evaluate what we had done together, and then, in October, contribute a flavour of the project at the Magic Me Annual General Meeting. On average there were 12 after school sessions, 3 full days of workshops, and an evaluation session.

## About the projects

In the following summary I will use a framework of headings to describe each project, and will make note of particular events, discoveries and developments that were particular to each one. I first want to highlight two threads that ran through the ten years.

### The importance of place

The first is that of location. The building itself was of huge significance. It was a space that celebrated women's lives, but had no identification with age or ethnicity. It was physically accessible to women with different levels of mobility, and had welcoming and friendly Reception staff. It was an ideal meeting ground. We learned and invented new creative approaches to the materials we were going to be working with, and to navigating the Reading Room, which could feel daunting, with its many rows of books and journals and a central table occupied by women and men studying hard. Our repeated projects made us feel 'at home'. When we started our first project the Library was a relatively new, and anonymous space. Towards the end of the project two participants wrote:

*The Women's Library -  
At first, a sophisticated prison,  
Now, warm and friendly,  
All bright and eager.*

Ovi Chaudhary and Marga Bell, 1993

By the end of our ten years we had inhabited almost every space in the building, performing and exhibiting in the foyer, the exhibition space, the Reading Room, the café and the seminar room, and in surrounding streets.

### The conversation

The second thread is the quality of exchange between the women in the project. From the beginning the women's curiosity about one another, the structured but spacious activities, and the fact that we were all, including the artists, women, provided a basis for an atmosphere of exchange, humour and

warmth. Both young and older women came for a variety of reasons. Some were attracted principally by the art forms, others by the chance to work with women of other ages and cultural backgrounds, and many a mixture of the two. The young women were, for the most part, invited by staff members at the School who knew the project, both for what they could offer and what they might gain. Older women also came for a combination of reasons, although many of them knew Magic Me through other projects. Older women who came to more than one project grew to have a very strong association with the whole project, building friendships with one another, and also growing in their confidence in terms of working with the younger women.

*The girls can throw any questions at us, and they expect us to be truthful.*

Adult participant

*The group is like a diary in itself. It's confidential; you can say what you want.*

Mulberry student

As artists we learned how to make room for all the varied and complex responses in the room, while holding a clear creative frame that meant that the project had a purpose and a direction. Many of the older women had simply not thought about themselves in these ways before: as part of womankind; as part of a dynamic of power and opportunity in which gender mattered; as connected to other women through our narratives, our triumphs and our challenges. Many of the young women found their older partners to be a safe and encouraging sounding board; women with whom to explore difficult feelings and experiences, and they all discovered a whole new 'host of witnesses' in the resources of the Library. All the women took creative risks, and challenged each other to do the same. Individuals frequently spoke about the opportunity afforded by the chance to be with women of another generation who were not relatives. This was the rich and potent territory in which the projects took place.

# BEAUTY? 2004

## Theme

Women, image and identity

Using photography, drama, collage, creative writing and curiosity, the group explored their ideas and feelings about beauty. They made many discoveries: that there can be beauty in sorrow, that not only the old miss how they used to look, that we often become more beautiful to one another as we get to know each other. We learned about peer pressure and judgement, about the joy of make-up and the fear of being seen without it. We celebrated glitter, bangles and shoes, as well as the transformative quality of affirmation and laughter, and the fear of not being good enough or fitting in.

## Art forms

Photography, Spoken Word performance

## Artists

Sue Mayo (performance skills), Anita McKenzie (photography), Leah Thorn (spoken word artist), Guest musician for the performance, Arike Video artist, Minou Norouzi (for the record of the performance)

## Participants

For the first project we recruited seven adults through other Magic Me projects, through local newspaper coverage, and through The Women's Library. The women were aged between 55 and 91.

A group of six Year 10 young women, aged 14 or 15, came from Mulberry School for Girls.

*In a circle*

*Resting on chairs*

*Eating, drinking, talking, listening*

*Thoughts of what we are, were, and will be*

*Together we learn from each other*

*The beauty of our gender*

From a poem by Pia Khan 1993

## Materials

The first Exhibition at The Women's Library was to be *Beauty Queens: Smiles, Swimsuits and Sabotage*. This chronicled the history of beauty contests. The group were allowed prior access to materials that were going to be in the Exhibition, and learned about the protests against the 'Miss World' contests in the 1970s



## Outcome

The group created three large photographic images, each one a constructed image that demonstrated the meaning of Beauty to them. These showed: a group of women lying, laughing on the floor, covered in jewellery, make up and fabric called, 'It's when I'm with my mates, that's when I feel good'; (see photo opposite) an image of two of the group covered in images of eyes, some sad and some happy called, 'There is beauty in joy and in sorrow'; and an image of nature, with plants and the sun and the moon portrayed by the group, called, 'There is always beauty and comfort in nature'. The images were exhibited in The Women's Library foyer for six months, and in the school for the following year.

The participants performed their spoken word and poetry at the Private View of the exhibition, to an audience of Women's Library supporters and friends, and then again to two audiences of students from the school, performances which were filmed.

*I feel fiery and happy and confident, to be able to get up and say what I want to say in front of other people.*

Mulberry student

*Very moving – a very original and beautiful piece of performance art. Thank you, I really enjoyed it. It was especially nice to see a group with such a wide age range working together and creating a new and positive idea of how we can conceive of beauty.*

Audience feedback

## Thoughts on 'Beauty?': the theme as meeting place

This project was an opportunity to really test out the idea of a theme that all the participants could access equally. It worked very well for all the women in the group, not only enabling them to tell their stories and share experiences, but also to look at each other and at themselves. The context and content provided by the materials helped them to see their exploration in the context of wider women's experience. The demonstrations against the Miss World contest revealed through photos and newspaper accounts, got the group talking more about their anger, and the objectification of women that they had personally experienced. Much of the reflection was very personal. One particular memory for me is that of the adults' reaction when a Mulberry student showed us a photo of herself aged 8, and said, "I really miss how I looked". "No, we're meant to feel that!" said one older woman. These kind of surprises, when a narrative crossed over from where it was assumed to belong, enabled the group to expand their ideas about each other, and then, of themselves.

The theme also brought up anxieties about ageing, not just about how the older people felt, but also about how they imagined they were seen by the young women. Using the structure of praise poems, the group worked in pairs to write in appreciation of one another's beauty. This meant that they really needed

to look at one another, and, because we came to these poems over half way through the project, notice that what they saw was influenced by the process of having come to know one another better.

*Marion, your eyes are saddle brown, dark as a rainforest.  
Your lip, zinnia scarlet, brightens up  
The pale fragrance of your face.  
Your face glows as a golden charmer as you speak and laugh.*

*Shipa, you are like a blue breeze  
Cool and refreshing and yet inside  
You are a FIRE princess with lots of passion  
And so much love to give  
But all under control  
Like a rose bud before blooming*

Extract from poem by Marion Davies and Shipa Jobbar

This focus on the theme as the meeting place demonstrated the fluidity that is possible in participatory arts work. The theme provided the focus for reflection and articulation of self, for curiosity and interest in others, and a chance to move beyond habitual understandings of self and others. It gave us a sense of purpose that steered the activities, providing opportunities for playfulness as well as seriousness. The group laughed a lot about beauty regimes, but also spoke about the damage inflicted by broken relationships or disrespect that was expressed through negative comments about appearance. Everyone in the room had experience and opinions to offer.

*It is one of the best projects I have seen in terms of impact on their personal experience. They will remember this experience for a long time to come. They will never ever forget the feelings of relationships they had with the older women and how their self-esteem was developed through interaction with them.*

Kathy Pacey, then Head of Performing Arts, Mulberry School for Girls

# SPINNING PLATES 2005

## Theme

Women's relationship to the home

This theme was chosen partly in order that our group's responses could be fed into the forthcoming Exhibition, *What Women Want*. The Library saw *Spinning Plates* as part of a raft of work intended to strengthen its links to the local community, and to feed into its exhibition.

Research in the collection showed a huge number of books and magazines relating to women's relationship to the home, to the domestic, and this became the central focus for us as artists. However, on meeting the group, we had to adjust our initial approach. Half of the group were not yet taking full responsibility for the home, and other half were trying to shed as much responsibility as they could. The renegotiation of the theme was an important lesson in responsiveness. The artists were both women concerned with managing home, family and work, but we discovered early on how little everyone in the group cared about housework. The household manuals from the collection provided the refocusing for us, as they revealed so much about how women have passed on their knowledge and advice to their daughters and to other women, and this became our starting point. All the women reported that their mothers had had far fewer opportunities than them. Many of their mothers had had little access to education, and had not worked outside the home. They all felt that women needed to be and do a great many things in a lifetime.

## Art forms

Photography and text

Building on the group's work on deconstructing photographic images of women in the previous year, we wanted to work on carefully designed and constructed images of women and the home, that would encapsulate the group's exploration. These would be presented as an A4 calendar.

## Artists

Frances Kearney (photography) and Sue Mayo (creative writing)  
Volunteer (holiday workshops only) Izzy Edmeston  
Calendar designed by Diane Butler

## Participants

Three of the older women continued from the first year and three new members were recruited.

Eleven young women from Year 10 participated.



## Materials

Household Manuals.

The Resource room had a huge number of manuals and handbooks advising women on how to manage their homes. These ranged from a hand-written book of advice made by a mother for her daughter in the 1700s, to contemporary coffee table books on managing the work/life balance. Our sources included *The Complete Serving Maid* (1867), *Guide to running your home* (1910), *How to live with a working wife* (1983) and *Superwoman* (1973). We also looked at Women's magazines from the 1930s to the 1990s.

Since our first project, The Women's Library had lost the post of Education and Outreach Officer, and was working with the consultant Anna Salaman on its Audience Development strategy. Anna had experience of participatory work in Museums and Galleries, and worked with the group when they encountered the manuals for the first time. She was able to model ways in which a Museum Educator would work to help people to connect to materials that might seem very inaccessible to them. She led a very focused session, asking a lot of open questions, and encouraging the group to look for detail. We sat in a small room, just off the Reading Room, and the older texts were on special stands, held open with weighted cord. This encounter with materials gave us our first really clear understanding of the impact of the documents as artefacts. The group felt amazed to see and touch such old books, and were all overwhelmed by the commitment of a mother who had handwritten a household manual for her daughter. The specialness of the presentation did not seem to make them feel distanced, but special themselves.

*It was an absolute honour to touch the very old books.*

Participant 2005

## Outcome

Throughout the exploratory workshops we were identifying key themes, and looking for staged images that would tell these stories; woman as superwoman, shown as a woman with eight arms, holding domestic appliances; the joy of not caring about housework, shown by a young and an older woman sitting in bed eating biscuits; the assumption by men that women will manage the home, shown by a bride and her bridesmaid carrying bouquets of feather dusters (see photo left). These images and some poems were made into a calendar, an important domestic feature, with each image accompanied by a quotation identified from the Household Manuals.

The Calendar was launched at the Private View of *What Women Want* at The Women's Library. The Library changed the date of the launch after the project started, and many of the group could not attend because of Jewish and Muslim religious festivals. However, those who could come sold copies enthusiastically at the launch, referencing the Women's Institute 'nude calendar' (the film

*Calendar Girls* had come out in 2003) by saying to potential buyers – “I’m Miss April” “I’m Miss October” and so on. Calendars were also distributed through Magic Me, and the School sent copies to a wide range of friends and supporters. Group members reported being recognised in the street during the following year, such was the dissemination of the calendar.

In response to the Library’s theme, *What Women Want*, the group concluded that what they, as women, wanted to be happy was quite simple.

*Freedom and a life*

*A family and money*

*It’s what women want*

Summary of women’s desires, by the younger women

### **Thoughts on Spinning Plates: the relationship with materials**

We had a wealth of material to use on this project. The manuals revealed the incredible complexity of domestic life, and the huge range of skills that a woman has traditionally been expected to have. The magazines showed a marked shift in emphasis through the 20th Century, to include more content about self-care, including pampering and plastic surgery. The experience of researching the manuals for the group was most effective when it had a threefold approach: the sensory, including touch, sight and feel; the recognition of connectivity, when participants found something that connected directly to their own experience, (like the level of medical knowledge expected of a woman in 1867, which related to one participant’s memory of her grandmother, living in an isolated rural community), and the discovery of new knowledge, like the guide book for the man whose wife has gone out to work, written in 1983.

In addition to our exploration of the household manuals, we asked people to bring in objects from home. Through these we discovered a wealth of narrative expressed through the domestic: a Yiddish recipe book, owned and treasured by a non Yiddish speaker; a burned wooden spoon that recalled the instruction, “Don’t cook the spoon!”; a favourite, and as yet unworn, apron.

*When you look at a dustpan you think, “it’s just nothing”, but now you go in to your own world when you look at it. I’m looking at things in a different way now.*

Participant 2005

The theme allowed the group to share a lot of information with each other. They asked each other about wearing a headscarf, or managing a kosher kitchen, about fasting, about how the older women felt about bringing their children up in a particular religion, and about marriage. The informal teaching and learning that they were discovering through the manuals was also happening in the group.

The materials created a triangular relationship. In this way of working the group can meet each other through the materials; it gives them content and ideas to explore and play with, rather than just being faced with each other. The materials illuminate commonalities and differences, and stimulate more direct communication of experience and opinion, in some ways creating the common territory for the more personal exchange. And the group is learning together.

### **Postscript: 7/7**

During the life of the project there were bombings on the underground and on a bus in London as a result of the action of British Islamic extremists. The bombings claimed 52 lives and over 700 people were injured. The shock across London was enormous, and many people knew, or knew of someone affected. The group met a few days after the bombings, and our identities as White, Black, Muslim, Jewish, etc suddenly seemed to be much more evident. Perhaps with a sense of caution and self-protection, no one said anything about what had happened until I asked, "How is everyone after last week?" The young women were excited as Mulberry School was a fully equipped national emergency centre – all the walking wounded from the Aldgate bomb went there. There was an interesting discussion about a Jewish wounded person being the first person to arrive at the school. There was discomfort, but there was also a sense of relief. There weren't many places where a group such as this could meet and talk. Later in the project those who wore the hijab were also able to tell the others about the increase in verbal abuse they encountered after the bombings. I would not want to overestimate any sense of dialogue within the group. I would imagine that many of the participants had their prejudices increased as a result of the bombings. What did seem to be an achievement, however, was to continue doing our creative project together; that against this backdrop a Muslim young woman was teaching a Jewish Londoner how to wear make up, a 75 year old woman of Nigerian origin was standing in for all mothers in a photo shoot with her Bangladeshi partner, and we were all having tea together on a weekly basis.

# HEARTFELT 2006

## Theme

Protest: What would we all march for now?

Protest is at the heart of The Women's Library collections. The materials relating to the women's suffrage movement in particular have a very significant place. For us though, it was not the materials that led us to the theme, but the group.

The first two projects had thrown up interesting issues relating to the life experience, ethnicity and faith communities represented among our participants, and this theme was chosen to help us explore more openly some of these issues. The memory of the July bombings still provided a backdrop to all discussions relating to identity, faith and ethnicity, and events in Iraq were a current source of public debate. Our approach was to focus on the idea of protest, and passion – what did we all feel strongly enough to choose to march for, or against? This frame provided a structure that allowed participants to be only as personal as they felt comfortable with, but also to speak about faith and identity in a way they had not before.

## Art forms

Writing and 3D sculpture, chosen to allow for verbal and non-verbal work.

## Artists

Cath Goldstein (sculptor), Sue Mayo (spoken word), Surya Turner (storytelling)

## Participants

Six adults participated, three of whom had done the project before. Two others had been recruited, but one experienced ill health and left the project, and the other was unhappy to be working with Bangladeshi origin girls, so did not come after the taster session for the adults. This was the only occasion on which we encountered a clearly expressed difficulty with the make up of the group, which the individual concerned saw as an attempt at social engineering.

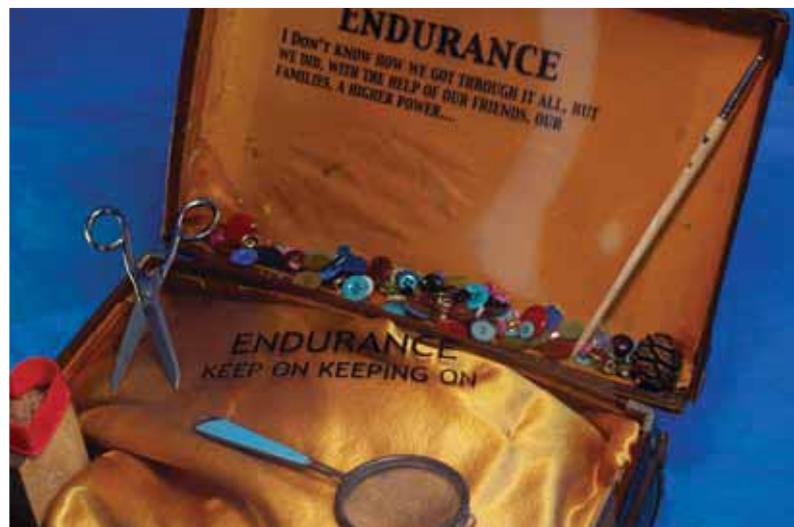
Nine young women from Year 10 participated.

## Materials

The suffragette handling collection.

Early on in the project, Gail Cameron, Curator of The Women's Library, led a session with the group using The Women's Library collection relating to the Suffragettes. The group was very moved to be able to handle objects owned by

Opposite page, clockwise from top: *War Games, Endurance, Islam, Memories, Friendship*





women in the suffrage movement, and to hear stories of their lives and their campaigns. They were very struck by the way in which those women supported each other, for example, meeting women being released from prison and celebrating with a breakfast party. They were also struck by the way in which the women gathered. Without social media, and telephones only for those of an adequate income, the women needed to meet in person. The group noticed the sense of celebration that accompanied the suffragette demonstrations, expressed in song and beautiful banners. This was in sharp contrast to stories of force-feeding and imprisonment.

This session fed into many discussions, and when local elections took place, the suffragettes were cited forcefully when it emerged that two women in the group had chosen not to vote. One adult in her 70s voted for the first time that year.

### **Outcome**

The group explored the theme through discussion and writing, but then turned to the 3D collage work to make a record of their heartfelt causes.

*With this process nothing has to be stuck down or fastened in any way, which provides a lot of freedom to place and move objects around, to experiment. Certain objects or materials were chosen as a vehicle for illustrating a feeling or atmosphere. Others created words as part of the image to emphasize their point. Some people laboured over their pieces, others made them in minutes. It was a brilliant medium for creating fast, exciting images.*

Cath Goldstein, Project Artist

They worked mostly in pairs, with one young woman and one older woman, but also chose to make two images within their 'generational' group, the girls making an image of the beauty and peace in Islam, and the adults making an image of the need for endurance. Neither of these fell into the category of issues the women would march for, but they absolutely did come under the heading, 'heartfelt'.

*I like working with a different person. Working with someone else makes you more aware of how other people think.*

Mulberry student

Each collage was photographed, and the group chose nine of them to be made into a composite wall hanging. This was launched at Mulberry School for Girls, and the piece is still hanging there in 2013. The School paid for a calendar to be made from the images, which they distributed in winter 1996.

The group was subsequently invited to be a part of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations of the Battle of Cable Street (when marching fascists were turned back by local people in 1936), where we ran a participatory activity on the theme of what is heartfelt.

### Thoughts on Heartfelt: dealing with challenging issues

We made a clear decision to choose a theme that would allow for subject matter that seemed to be just below the surface to be expressed. Given the real interest in one another that most of the participants demonstrate, and the desire to have a good, enjoyable time, it is no surprise that individuals steer clear of areas that they fear might cause conflict. Yet we were all aware that, in this group of participants, all the young women were from Muslim families, and the girls came to know that some of the women were Jewish, some Christian. Given tensions in London emerging both from recent national and international events, continued conflict in the Middle East, and the lack of opportunities people in East London who are not working have to meet one another, the atmosphere was ripe for continued unchallenged assumptions to be made, and for the complexity and nuance of the lived experience of the group to fail to emerge. Using the suffragette archive as our core material allowed the group to mediate their initial conversations through the lens of another struggle.

Nonetheless, the personal was always present. The nature of the theme encouraged discussion about identity, life experience, politics and values. It is worth remembering that the older women did not know each other very well, and the girls came from different classes, so everyone was in a position of learning about the others. The older women were able to debate with one another, and the girls witnessed some robust arguments, about failing to vote, and about voting for controversial politician George Galloway, as well as seeing the older women maintaining their friendship despite disagreement. Gradually, the girls who wear hijab were able to share their own experiences of verbal abuse because of their Muslim identity. Older Jewish women shared their memories of the Battle of Cable Street, when they were under threat from the fascist Blackshirts, which allowed the girls to see their own experience in a much wider context.

Making assumptions often involves clustering together information without checking it out, so White goes with Christian goes with pro-military intervention, or Muslim goes with hijab goes with fundamentalism. These conversations allowed the individuals to reveal themselves and discover about others in a way that picked the assumptions apart, and the individuals discovered people who didn't fit the boxes. The group openly expressed to one another their delight at discovering more of the reality of who each other were. One week, before the girls arrived, the women discussed how best to refer to God, in order to remain inclusive, and agreed on 'a higher power'.

*I don't know any Muslim girls, and now I have met you I know we are all the same somehow.*

Adult participant

*I did not expect to have anything in common with you, but you are not what I expected.*

Mulberry student

It was important that as artists we were not fearful. Surya and I had worked together before, using drama to explore issues around race and diversity with young mums in Eltham, an area associated with racist crime since the murder of Stephen Lawrence in 1993. This gave us a good grounding and a shared language. The work with 3D installations was ideal: working together the pairs could always show what they meant by placing materials or objects, and then move them again. It was an arena for experimentation and playfulness – getting away for a while from words. A group of the adults recorded the ways in which coincidental personal connections, the example of women’s struggles from the Collections and the work with materials, all supported the group’s exploration.

### **Heartfelt**

*Two generations meeting as one.  
We look at each other,  
Wondering what the journey will be.  
A weakness for chocolate forms a link.  
Make-up and fashion,  
Spaghetti and spirituality.  
Laughter, disagreement,  
Like a family gathering.*

*It’s good to have a chatter,  
Catching up about the week.  
Gaining strength from each other.  
All women together,  
Like the suffragettes, marching.  
Silence, as we passed around the hunger striker’s medal.  
Proof of her story,  
Not forgotten.*

*Our story,  
Our struggles,  
Revealed through buttons,  
Toys, fabric, photos  
Arranged,  
So that others will know  
What is,  
For us,  
Heartfelt.*

Sally Flood, Marion Davies, Rachel Ogunleye, Joanna Judge,

# SOUNDTRACKS 2007

## Theme

Women's Voice

Women's Voice is key to the work of The Women's Library. The theme of voice, and how we express ourselves was relevant to all the participants. Both young people and older people often express a sense that they are not being heard, and the challenge to 'find my voice' is one that faces all women. The different languages spoken, both in terms of mother tongue and of age, slang and cultural influences were also explored.

We had met Jules Wilkinson in 2006, when she came to interview the group as part of a radio documentary she was making for BBC Radio 4. Through her careful and respectful approach to the group, and the way in which their voices powerfully carried identity, emotion and humour, I felt that a deeper exploration of their voices and what they had to say would be a rich theme.

## Art forms

Sound recording, creative writing

## Artists

Leah Thorn (spoken word artist), Sue Mayo (creative writing), Jules Wilkinson (sound artist)

With Lore Windermuth as an additional sound recordist

## Participants

There were 8 young women and 8 older women on the project. Five of the adults had been part of previous projects.

## Materials

Women's Diaries (including Anne Frank, Sylvia Plath, Olivia Cockett).

Faced with the whole of The Women's Library collection, Leah suggested that diaries were the place where we might most vividly 'hear' the voices of women. She and I did preliminary research in the Library locating both passages from published diaries, and items such as a pencil written prison diary from a suffragette. We asked the group to keep their own diaries.

We also invited the group to bring in recordings of favourite songs – a kind of Desert Island Discs, and to tell us about what it was about that voice and that song that meant something to them. An exploration of silence provoked relief and calm for some, and a sense of loneliness and loss for others.



## Outcome

The group, with Leah and Sue, selected diary extracts, and stories and moments from the group discussions, scripting them loosely. Jules worked with the group on qualities of voice, and ways to play with words and sounds. She recorded the group in sound studios at Rich Mix, a cultural centre in Bethnal Green, and in Mulberry School's recording studio.

This was the area of work that was most unfamiliar to the group (recording and editing), and the discovery of what was possible to do with their voices was an exciting adventure. Several people had never heard their voice played back to them before. Watching the group as they listened to a rough cut of their final sound piece was a stunning experience. The whole group was absolutely gripped, and slowly huge smiles began to appear. They were astonished at themselves. Jules commented that she was rarely with people she had recorded at the first playing of the rough cut. She looked up from making detailed notes about timing to see their look of astonishment and delight.

The group called the audio piece, *My voice is the key to my freedom*, after hearing Rachel Ogunleye, one of the older women make this clear and bold statement. It was launched at the party to celebrate the 5th year in its current building of The Women's Library. We (the artists) created a slide show – images from the project workshops and the faces of women whose diaries we had used – but in retrospect this felt like a failure to believe in the power of the audio, and they were a distraction rather than a help. Nonetheless audience feedback was enthusiastic:

*A simple but very powerful idea. Thank you.*

*Inspiration plus humanity.*

## Thoughts on Soundtracks: Connection

The understanding of the diary as a place where an individual keeps a personal record of events, ideas and feelings stood as a metaphor for the potential of the project as a place to allow the personal voice its space. Many of the group spoke initially of their concerns about their differences:

*I must say that in my heart, because of the culture, I thought we might not get on, but we have. I was worried about how they might see us.*

*I was very wary, how am I going to cope among strangers? But everybody's been quite OK with me. Everyone's just sat and listened and not been sarky or said you don't speak proper English.*

Adult participants.

One of the young women wrote about a shift in her own attitude to the project once it had started, a shift from coming because the idea was worthy, to coming because of what she gained.

*I'm not doing it for a good cause; I'm doing it 'cause I like it. I have the intention and I know why. If I had known I would be meeting every Wednesday with older people I would never have believed how everyone gets along.*

Concentrating on voice meant that the group were tuning in to one another, really listening to each other beyond appearance and image. They enjoyed the playfulness of the recording, when, for example, an 80 year old participant recorded the words of young women who couldn't live without their friends, a sentiment she shared, and when an adult Jewish woman and a 14 year old Muslim woman shared between them a reading from Anne Frank's diary each of them reflecting a key aspect of the author's identity. A young woman who wanted her words in the recording but didn't want to be identified, chose one of the older women to read them for her. The group became adept at listening out for words that had resonance: 'You blurt out what's in your heart' (below) became a repeated motif in the audio piece. When the whole group, or more than the author of words share the sentiment, stand behind the text, the individuals inhabit their connections. And the group's feedback at the end of the project indicated just how important the opportunity to speak, to listen and to be listened to had been.

*What makes the difference is the people here. I like all the people here, so I can speak my mind.*

Mulberry student

*When you get older, who do you talk to? You blurt out what's in your heart. I think we're bonding, learning more about each other. I can talk more here than I can with my own daughters. Here I'm not Mum. There's more to me than Mum.*

Older participant

### **Postscript: Change at The Women's Library**

Financial constraints at The Women's Library in 2007 made it seem, for a short time, that we would not be able to run the project there that year. This potential change made us acutely aware of the value of the organisation, both as a space and as a rich resource. The older women valued meeting in a building not designated for activities for the 'Elderly'. The young women valued being away from school, and the whole group benefited from close contact with an organisation dedicated to the history of women. The adults made it clear to us that they would not want the project to move to a Day Centre. Happily, The Women's Library reviewed its decision and we were able to continue with the partnership.

# CANI? I CAN! 2008

## Theme

Being the first woman to do something, and doing something for the first time

Our theme this year was agreed in consultation with Library staff. The collection contains many accounts of women who have pioneered the way forward for other women, some by being the first in a particular profession, others, like Mary-Ann Rawle, by going to prison in her struggle for women's suffrage, an act that went beyond the conventions of her family, milieu and gender. Within the group we knew that we had experiences of breaking the mould: the first in the family to marry outside the faith; the first to come to live in England, the first to contemplate going to University. We explored achievement, but also frustration, and the costs of breaking away from tradition.

The Women's Library invited us to create an interactive element for their new exhibition, 'Between the Covers' (a history of Women's magazines). We used creative writing, photography, and 3D artwork, to create an arch of images, objects and words that the public could step through (see photo, right).

The project title acted as a spur to us all, to try something new, to be ambitious in our hopes and desires, and not to give in.

*Can I? I Can! What did it mean to me? Now I know when the pain is bad and I seem not to be able to do anything I say, Can I? I Can!*

Adult participant

## Art forms

Art, craft, photography, text

## Artists

Polly Beestone (visual art and craft), Sue Mayo (creative writing),

Anita McKenzie (photography).

Volunteer, Rashna Begum

## Participants

Eight older women participated, six of whom had done previous projects.

Five young women joined, two of Somali origin, and three of Bangladeshi origin.

Four were from Year 10, and one from Year 9.

## Materials

In the Resource Room we studied examples of women who had broken through, as lawyers, astronauts, plumbers and athletes.



Participants were fascinated and inspired by the women they read about.

*When I discovered about the first woman lawyer I felt very proud.*

*I just wouldn't imagine that a woman, (Mary Ann Rawle) could subject herself to such agonizing treatment because of her womenfolk.*

*She never gave up but continued until there was a happy ending, recognizing women by the authorities.*

*It's amazing that many women have done things and didn't publicize their hidden quality.*

As the project progressed, we were aware that friendships were forming, and members of the group were feeling safe enough to share some challenging experiences. The title led people to think about its opposite – I can't – and many of the group spoke about those feelings and experiences too. For the girls, the experience of the interested and compassionate listening of the adults allowed them to express and explore experiences of acceptance and rejection, of feelings of failure, and of the struggle to know quite who you are within the contexts of school and home.

*I thought I was going to be left out because I was the youngest...But everyone was so caring and co-operative. I loved it!*

Mulberry student

For the adults, the interest and encouragement of the girls allowed them to step out of the sense of themselves as 'old', to share disappointments and struggles, but also to think about the future, and what they might still hope to do and be.

*I felt that people were prepared to engage in something a bit risky, because it was being held. The way it was led allowed people to bring what they bring – whatever they say is valued and respected, but there was also a clarity and focus to which we could return.*

Polly Beestone

## **Outcome**

The final installation was an archway of two trees decorated with blossoms made by the group showing achievements, desires and disappointments. The idea of the arch came about through our growing understanding during the project that all these people, who had been the first at something, had had to step across a line, had had to leave something behind in order to embrace the future. The archway was exhibited within the main exhibition at The Women's Library, and later transferred to the School. *Between the Covers* was an exhibition reflecting the changing themes and concerns of Women's magazines. While the project theme didn't draw directly from the Exhibition, stories of

women breaking 'the glass ceiling', or being pioneers in large and small ways, was one that featured in magazines consistently. Our artwork would therefore foreground this narrative within the exhibition. We worked closely with the Curator as the idea developed, learning as we went about exhibition standards of safety and quality. We, and all the participants, felt very honoured to be placed in the exhibition, and we were delighted to hear about how much people went through the arch as they went around the exhibition.

*Putting our work upon the tree was very new to me because that's my first time of bringing that kind of art into my knowledge. In the end what started like a child's play became authentic and we were pleased seeing it.*

Adult participant

This being our fifth project at The Women's Library, we decided to have a celebration, and invite back all the participants and artists who had worked on the projects so far. The Library staff worked with us on this and we had activities all around the space, led by Magic Me and Library staff. Two young women who had participated in the first year of the project came back, and were delighted to see that the project was still going.

### **Thoughts on Can I? I Can!: Working with The Women's Library**

Our partnership with The Women's Library on these projects consisted principally of free space, access to the resources, and, when possible, contact with Library staff to help us with research and interpretation work. This year we were being commissioned to provide an interactive aspect for their main exhibition. This brought us into a much closer dialogue with staff, in particular the Curator. We had a lot to learn about exhibition standards and realities. The installation had to be safe and stable, robust enough to survive three months in an unsupervised exhibition space. Some lovely ideas we had along the way, (Perspex trees, for example) proved to be much too expensive, and the tree idea had many hurdles to overcome before we arrived at a solution. (The trees, for example had to be treated to ensure that no small bugs came in on them). The Curator and other staff showed enormous patience, both with our learning curve, and in their understanding that the group was building the idea up, and we didn't always immediately have answers to their questions. The group enjoyed presenting the idea to staff, and, once the main installation of the trees was done, with hanging the blossoms, and thinking about our audience.

At the same time the ambition of the project did put pressure on the participants and artists. On our main making days we had to hold a delicate balance between allowing ideas to develop and change, and getting the work to an adequate standard. Some of the group's work had to be remade, or altered by the artists, to make sure that it was going to last. But none of the group objected to this. For most of them the big 'first' of the project was having their work in a public exhibition.

*Seeing the finished product was amazing. So many ideas hung from the trees. I enjoyed this session and the images spoke.*

*It was really cool when we all went under the tree.*

*It was amazing to see my work up the tree. I AM VERY PROUD AND HAPPY!*

Through this project we met the new Learning and Participation Officer, Joanna Ingham. Working with her and other staff on both the exhibition and the 5 Years celebration made an important difference to our relationship with the Library, with the staff getting a much clearer sense of our work, and us feeling more closely in partnership with them than before. The tree changed the look of the exhibition, and brought local women's lives and stories into the space. We also had a sense that the staff at the Library had needed the regularity of the project to give them evidence of its worth, and to enter into a more active relationship. This project marked a high point in terms of contributing to the Library as well as benefiting from it.

One very positive outcome was a commitment from The Women's Library and from the School to continue the partnership, and we then set out to achieve funding for the next three years. We worked extensively on a Heritage Lottery Fund grant application, but were unsuccessful. While this was disappointing, the grant would have slanted the work more towards the collection of oral history, and in retrospect this was not the most interesting or fruitful way to work with this group.



# UTOPIA ACCORDING TO ME

## 2009

### Theme

Utopia

Notions of Utopia and Dystopia occur frequently in feminist literature (Margaret Atwood, Ursula K. Le Guin, Marge Piercy), and other materials in the Collection explored clear plans and ideas for what would make a better world (records of the Suffragette movement, anti-nuclear protests, campaigns against the trafficking of women). We were interested in how the group would imagine the future in the context of some of these materials.

Few of the group had come across the word, Utopia, before the project. Presented with the concept and asked to imagine it, most of the participants began by thinking of what would make their own lives better, then moved on to ideas about their families and locality, and then thought about the broader national and international picture.

From the start, they were aware of the limitations of ideas of Utopia.

*Utopia? I couldn't really live with it. OK for a holiday.*

*Everyone's Utopia is different, and we can't have them all.*

*A perfect world won't make you think. You wouldn't have anything to work for.*

We explored both what Utopia/s might look like, but also what it was those who described Utopias want to change. One of the group spoke about needing 'glimpses of Utopia' and this led us to develop our thinking in terms of the need to try to build a perfect world, without necessarily ever wanting to get there.

### Art forms

Photographic images, performance

### Artists

Polly Beestone (installation), Sue Mayo (performance), Anita McKenzie (photography)

Volunteer, Lauren Crowe

## Participants

There were nine older women, six of whom had done the project before. Seven girls signed up to the project, but only five attended with any regularity. Two of the girls had real personal difficulties, one a mental health issue, and one a very difficult home situation. The adults really missed the girls when they did not attend, but also felt frustrated at their lack of understanding of the importance of coming.

*I wish I could talk to them, and tell them how important it is! Where else would they meet ladies like us? We should be on the curriculum!*

One of the girls enjoyed a session when she was the only one to attend.

*I feel a bit selfish. Yes! I've got the older women all to myself!*

An accident turned out to have a silver lining for us. When our most committed attendee fell and dislocated her knee, the father of another girl, who was a cab driver, agreed to bring them all each week in his taxi. With consistent attendance the young women's commitment to and involvement in the project grew, and by the final event the group had made a real investment in the work they were doing together.

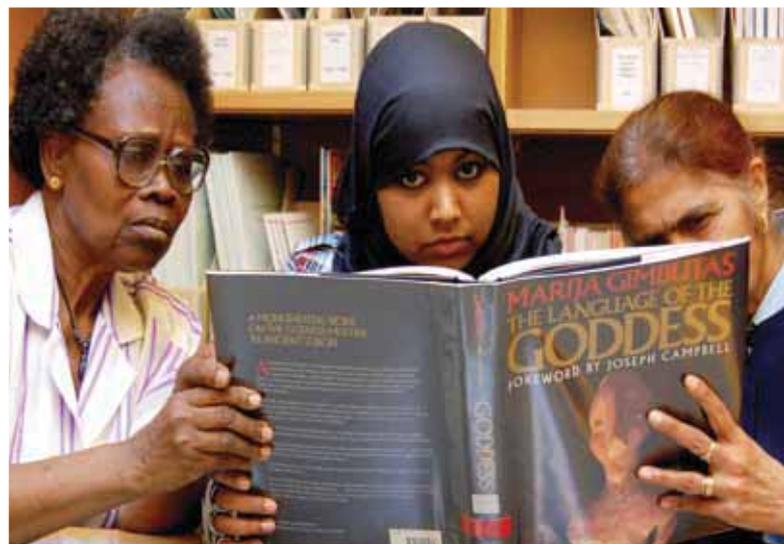
## Materials

With Joanna Ingham, Sue and Anita identified a set of artefacts and images from the Library's resources that would get the group thinking and talking. These were not all about Utopia; some were campaigning materials which enabled us to ask the question, 'What did these campaigners want? What was the world they were campaigning for?'

We also selected some texts. Particularly significant were Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915) and *Sultana's Dream* (1905), by Roquia Sakhawat Hussain.

The latter was not part of the Library's collection, but had a considerable impact on the group, none of whom had been aware of the existence of a Bengali feminist novelist. Hussain imagines a world where men are kept indoors and must wear hijab because they are so argumentative. Only women are allowed to walk freely in public because of their peace loving natures. Shanaz Begum, our project partner at Mulberry School, introduced us all to the book, and was able to bring her own knowledge of it to the group.

We decided to try to get ideas about Utopia from a wider audience. We sent out blank postcards to friends, family and supporters, asking them to send us their views of Utopia. The group loved receiving the completed cards, with messages, illustrations and thoughts from a wide circle of senders. The



responses were thoughtful and often inspiring. These cards were made into an installation that occupied one end of the Reading Room (see images below).

### Outcome

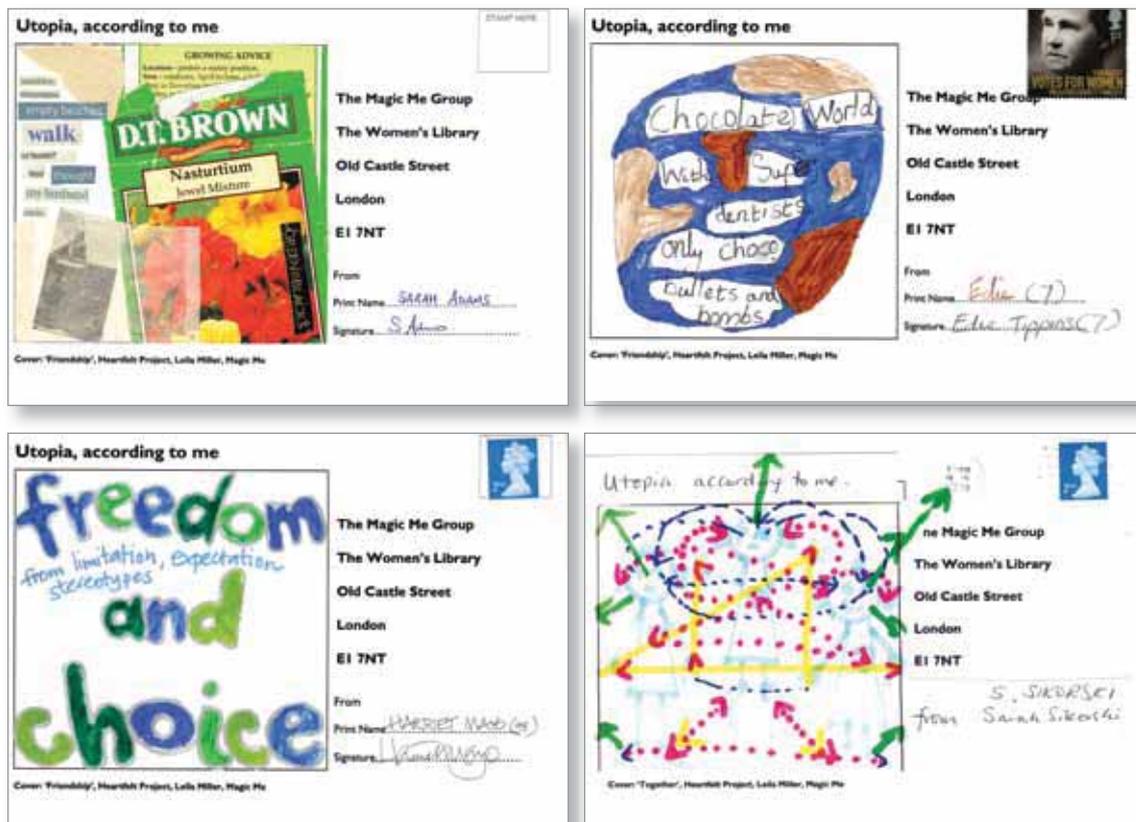
The group created photographic images that became a set of five campaigning postcards. Each one had a theme which started 'If you want Utopia....' and finished 'Negotiate, Communicate', 'Dream, dream, dream', 'Stand your ground!', 'Look, learn and lead', and 'Stand up for your rights'.

The group created a short performance, which took place in the Reading Room, close to the installation, followed by a tea party for guests.

### Thoughts on Utopia: the tea party

Joanna Ingham at The Women's Library actively encouraged us to spread more into the building and it was she who suggested the Reading Room as our performance/exhibition space. This brought the group and the audience right into the heart of the Library, its collection. But it also pushed us to think about how to spend time with the audience, and enter into a dialogue. We decided to set out tea tables in the café, and invite the audience to have tea at tables hosted by group members, to continue the conversation about Utopia.

This was the beginning of an aspect of the project that continued and grew, becoming an intrinsic part of our events. The group hosted the tables in pairs,



as much as was possible. Having participated in many discussions and activities through the project, we found that the group felt very confident in leading the conversation at the tables. They were welcoming and warm, and we as artists stepped back completely and just kept the tea flowing. This seemed to be such an appropriate development. The audience enjoyed meeting the makers of the work they had seen, and the group loved meeting the audience, not just to hear feedback, but also to hear what they had to say about the themes. The group moved from being guests of The Women's Library to hosts and could share what they had learned not only through the structured frame of performance or product. There were challenges. Some of the older women found it hard to share the hosting, and took charge, sidelining their younger partner. These same older women could be prone to monologues, rather than engaging in dialogue. If we noticed this happening we would sometimes join the table to try to bring the balance back into a free flowing discussion, but often the situation would right itself, for example with an audience member directly engaging with the younger host. One audience member wrote to us later,

*Just thought it might be useful to put in writing how brilliantly the women and girls facilitated the discussion at the tables. They did it with such ease and thoroughly engaged us in great conversation. As I said I've attended plenty of events over the years where these kinds of moments were awkward and stilted and I never felt like this for a moment, I really enjoyed it.*

I would add that attention was paid to the tea itself, with china cups and saucers, teapots, and good cakes and biscuits. It was meant to be enjoyed, and not to just be the setting for the conversations.



# DRESSING UP! 2010

## Theme

Womens' relationship with our clothes

The participants explored the ways in which women disguise themselves and express themselves through clothes. We examined images of women from all over the world, and through time, as well as looking at our own realities and fantasies. Using photographic images and reproductions of paintings of women we explored the differences between standing out and blending in, looked at dressing to impress and being comfy and cosy. As a theme for the whole group it worked very well. Although there were different concerns and priorities, (like school uniform, or comfortable shoes), all of the group loved to talk about clothes, and really enjoyed expanding their horizons.

## Art forms

Costume, text and performance

Throughout the project the artists facilitated writing about clothes, their feel, their look, their messages. The group explored their different identities, the manner in which they dress in different ways for different roles, moods and identities. The group made simple garments, hats and decorative wear out of newspaper, for themselves and for one another, and then created fantasy costumes for the performance (see photos, left).

## Artists

Polly Beestone (costume), Surya Turner (text), Sue Mayo (direction).  
Guest artist, Auriol Ramsay (Dressing Up Clothes)  
Volunteer, Lily Einhorn

## Membership

Seven older women participated, all of whom had done the project before.  
Seven young women from year 10 participated.

## Materials

We had two sessions with items from The Women's Library collection. The first one was a chance to look at selected photographic images and illustrations showing a variety of women from different eras, including women in professional dress, in drag, and in ball gowns. Out of this came questions about clothes and ideas of class and identity, glamour and usefulness. More impactful for the group was the opportunity to look at four garments from the collection: Emma Thompson's Oscar outfit, a Greenham Common protester's boiler suit, a dress that had belonged to a suffragette, and athlete Sally Gunnell's unitard. Being able to touch them, (wearing gloves) and get a sense of their materiality,

as well as having some knowledge of their owners, provided a very vivid point of departure, helping us to think about ways of dressing, materials, freedom and constriction. It also provoked extraordinary stories from the group, including that of a woman of Jewish descent, whose parents were given a Nazi flag during World War II, by her Uncle. Her mother cut it up to make them clothes, and she had a nice white coat out of it. Another woman told us about her free wedding dress, given to her by a cousin who had been jilted at the Altar. A young woman described spending as much of the weekend in her pyjamas as possible.

Auriol Ramsay brought us her huge trunk of period clothes, and the group spent a day dressing up, and dressing each other up. This day provoked a huge release of fun and energy.

*I look different. I feel different!*

Mulberry student

### **Outcome**

The group performed in the Reading Room, initially moving around as if working there, but wearing items of costume that reflected an aspect of their personalities that they felt was normally hidden. These included devil's horns and a tail, a Ra-Ra skirt, a wedding veil and what the participant described as a nun/spy's robe. Fragments of text from the script were printed onto the fabric. The group's performance explored their own lives and experiences and how these were expressed and hidden through what they wore. As the audience arrived they were offered costumes from Auriol's collection, and no one declined the offer. The tea party was a fabulous affair, with the whole room in costume.

*I remember when the performance day came; we were all in the little room, fixing up the last twitches of our costume. We glued on things and tightened things. Everyone was fussy and happy.*

Mulberry participant

*A study space became a performance space. It looked such fun to be in there!*

Audience response

### **Thoughts on Dressing Up: the activities**

*We're exploring ourselves – thoughts and feelings, things you may be hadn't articulated. Magic Me means "I'm worth exploring".*

Adult participant

Looking back at some of the exercises and activities that we did on this project, I am struck by the way in which the activity can hold the space in a way that

allows for freedom. There is an offer from the artists that sets the context, and within that the participants provide all the content and narrative and flavour. The structure is necessary; it provides an invitation to do something new, and it frames the work in a way that helps the participants to feel they are supported. The responses to the invitation, the narratives that emerge and the relationships that are built all inform the artists about the group. Surya and I were interested in the way women's clothes had developed over the centuries, but the group weren't. Looking at images and clothes from The Women's Library's collection opened up ideas of class and identity, glamour and usefulness, and the group reflected on a crucial aspect of clothes for them – sometimes you want to blend in and sometimes you want to stand out.

Following the group's lead, Surya encouraged the group to write about clothes, their feel, their look, and their messages. The group explored their different identities, the manner in which they dress in different ways for different roles, moods and identities. Surya performed one of her own pieces for them, a poem about being a different person in different places, playing different roles, and the group went on to write about themselves, in school uniform in one place, in pyjamas with a big bunch of friends on another.

The Dressing Up day was pivotal for the group. We were acutely aware on this day that women dress to express what is interior, but can also learn about their identity by putting on something new, something a bit challenging, or pretending to be someone else. Looking at the photos, I am aware of how much everyone enjoyed being a star. The intergenerational nature of the project does not mean that all the emphasis is on group or on pairs. The support and encouragement of others, even being dared to do something (like the young women who danced for everyone in a top hat and tails) allows everyone to do more than they thought they could do.

Equally important to the choice of activities was the sense of purpose. Helping one another to dress, or helping one another to make and fit a piece of costume requires touch, and care, and I was very struck by a kind of respectful tenderness that existed between the young and older women from early on in the project. This came about because of the task. The task led the way of working. The quality of the relationship building was profoundly influenced by the sense of purpose, in a way that might have felt much more contrived if the only function of the group was to build relationships. At the same time the task was informed by the knowledge that these women seldom had opportunities to meet one another, never mind to be in physical contact in a collaborative setting.

*I am always doing things I don't think I can do when I'm at Magic Me!*

Adult participant

# MOVING LIVES 2011

## Theme

How do women archive, knowingly and unknowingly, their lives?

In this project the participants explored the ways in which women archive their own lives, intentionally and unintentionally. What objects, documents and images hold our memories, and what do we do with them? The group reflected both on themselves as collectors, thinking about how and what they collect, but also on the ways in which our personal archives help us to understand who we are. They looked at what was in the pocket of Emily Wilding Davison on the day she fell beneath the King's Horse in 1913, reflecting on how a group of objects can reflect a whole story.

*On this project we have been exploring all the ways in which we keep the memories of our lives. What we keep adds up and defines us as an individual. It is important to be able to hold something in your hand that holds your memories, that doesn't fade away. Things that are kept and preserved will be there forever.*

Mulberry student: an extract from her speech at the launch of the installation

## Art forms

Film, photography, text

Ellie Rees, project artist, gave the group an introduction to conceptual art, looking in particular at the work of Louise Bourgeois, Tracey Emin, Cornelia Parker, Annette Messenger and Helga Steppan. This session helped the whole group to begin to form a common understanding that the art that they were making might not be narrative or naturalistic, but could express ideas and emotions powerfully. We did a long period of research into our relationship with our possessions, and how they tell our stories, using life story, creative writing, and work with objects. Ellie worked with small groups using an overhead projector, fragments of their texts, and silhouetted objects, to create a series of luminous still and moving images (see photos right).

*I've changed my mind about modern art after this. It doesn't have to be symmetrical. I look at it in a different light. Wonky wavy words looked nicer. I kept trying to put things in order.*

Adult participant

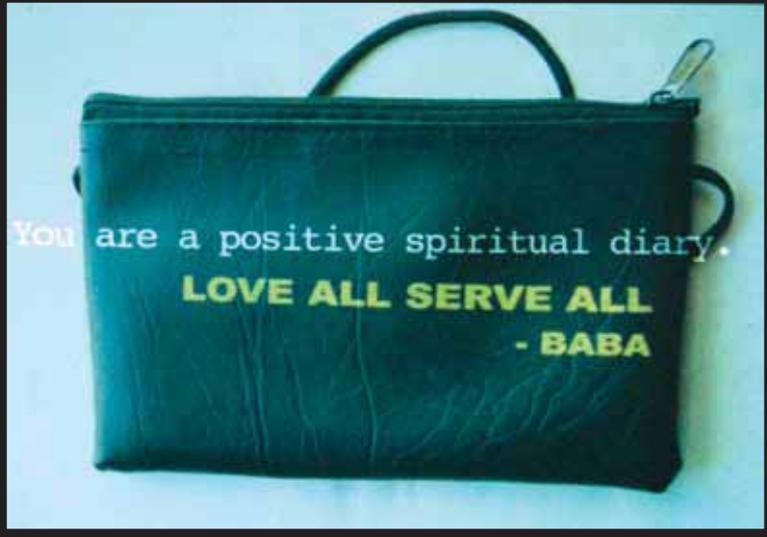
## Artists

Sue Mayo (creative writing), Ellie Rees (visual artist/film)  
Volunteer Kerry Clark

PRECIOUS  
MEMORY  
BUZZING B



SPARKLE  
With  
MEMORIE



## Participants

Six adults participated, five of whom had done previous projects. Seven young women participated.

## Materials

Materials relating to the suffragette, Emily Wilding Davison, including the contents of her pocket when she fell beneath the King's Horse at The Derby in 1913. We also looked at correspondence received during her final days, including hate mail.

While it is commonly held that she threw herself under the horse as a protest, her pocket contents reveal a purse containing a return ticket for the same day. This continues to be a subject of research and conjecture, but it was part of a challenge to a previously accepted narrative of suicide. The group was able to see her purse and her ticket, and to read the documentation surrounding her death and her arrest.

Tracey Weller, Participation and Education Officer at The Women's Library, facilitated an excellent session with the group and the materials, which not only made the link with an important story from the past, but also made the whole group aware of the narrative contained in seemingly ordinary objects.

The group were fascinated, enraged and inspired by her story, but we then went on to think about our belongings, and the stories they held. We thought about our diaries, photograph albums and keep-sake boxes. We looked for life-stories attached to gifts, souvenirs, travel tickets and items of clothing. One of the younger women talked to us about the death of her older sister. She told us about a poem written by her sister that she keeps as a memento.

The group brought in treasured objects, some accidental remnants of trips, of family, of culture, and others purposefully archived. A Telly Tubby toy met a doll taken by an adult to her new home in the country when she was evacuated during World War II.

*Those birthday and Christmas cards fly around you like a flock of birds, delivering messages from friends and families you love. And even though you sold your ring, the memory is locked in your heart.*

Meryam, writing about Roberta

*Your wooden treasure trove protects your memories, under the bed. Dreams come out of it like magic.*

Roberta, writing about Meryam

## Outcome

The seminar room in The Women's Library was transformed into an installation of image and sound. Three screens showed luminous images created by

the group, where their words danced across the screen against silhouetted images of objects. An audio of some of the group telling their stories played throughout.

The installation was at the the end of project sharing event, but we worked with the group to think of the whole event as important. Our invitation asked people to bring with them an object that held a memory for them. On arrival, each audience member was asked to bring their object to a table, where group members labelled it and heard a little of its story. Then audience members could be photographed with their object, in Polaroid to take home, and digitally. The digital images were added immediately to the installation.

Our tea tables were laid outside the seminar room, in the exhibition space, where an exhibition was, that very day, being taken down. Despite the presence of packing cases and toolboxes, the group loved being in the exhibition space, and many more Library staff came to this final event than normally did (because they were present for the exhibition get out). The group also felt that they made a really close relationship with the audience, because they had met them at the start of the event, and that audience members brought something to the table to talk about.

*It made it that people brought their objects. They were the most forthcoming at the tables because they had brought something. It was personalised.*

Adult participant

*It gets young and old to come together. We create amazing work- I'm sure we made some friends as well. We have things in common. We didn't expect to have so much in common, but through the project we realize we do. It's not just the young ones or the older ones who learn, we are all learning together, and learning from each other.*

Mulberry student: extract from her welcome speech at the launch

### **Thoughts on Moving Lives: making art**

In the introduction I described the way in which all the projects aim to build relationships, explore a theme, build skills and share work with an audience. The projects always built towards an end product, and these varied in terms of scale and size. As an organisation Magic Me is committed to quality in terms of the art that is made, and making sure that there is sufficient budget, and sufficient preparation to make sure that this happens. This is why, as an organisation it aims to employ experienced and skilled artists, who are able to judge the quality of the work, to judge the group's abilities and potential, and to provide both challenge and support. In order to be paying sufficient notice to the building of the group, and to people's personal development, it can be argued that the primary focus of the artist is the process, the journey undertaken in order to reach the final destination. Certainly, in order to make



*Above: Audience members show their objects.*

sure that the group are fully involved as art makers, I would say that we have sometimes left important decisions very late, and it has been a struggle to be finished and ready in time. In *Moving Lives* we had the added challenge of having to shorten the project by three weeks as the funding was confirmed very late, and we could not begin until it was in place. The choice to give the group a short introduction to conceptual art early on in the project was risky, but it was crucial that the group understood the ways of working that were being offered to them, and they had no difficulty in seizing the idea of visual art that was about ideas, and not narrative or representation.

Because the theme was a very powerful one for the group, the material for the final piece came easily, but Ellie and I decided to work really hard on arts skills. This meant not accepting everyone's first ideas. I particularly remember working on some poetry, and wondering whether to stay with my first response, which was a generalised enthusiasm, and appreciation of everyone's effort. However, none of the poems had yet moved beyond what my colleague on previous projects, Leah Thorn, described as "the scaffolding of the exercise". We needed to keep working on them. One participant felt very resistant, particularly because she distrusted metaphor and visual image, which she described as 'lies'. Her response opened up the possibility of discussion, and the whole group set to work to refine their poems, to critique one another, and to think about what they wanted to present to an audience. For some of the group this meant one to one attention and encouragement. It is hard work to keep reworking text or images or performance, and sometimes as an artist I am aware that I have reached what is, at that time, a participant's boundary of possibility.



With the filmed material, the group had to trust us to edit it – editing was not something we could offer to the whole group. Editing is very difficult in a group, and the group had also not yet acquired the experience to make aesthetic decisions on the editing. This in itself presents a challenge for an artist? How do you honour what the group want but maintain your own sense of what works best? None of the group had any experience of the kind of installation we were proposing, and so they did need to trust us, the artists. On the whole they were very pleased with the outcome, although some of them felt they themselves had not been present enough in the images. This is where there can be a tension. The artist, Ellie in this case, is editing to get the best result possible, but the group may want to see each person represented equally. Ellie’s choice was to represent our theme as strongly as possible, and ultimately it was important to the group that the audience thought their work was good, not that it was good for a community group. The whole context of the event – the meeting of the audience at the start and the tea party afterwards became crucial here, and not an add-on. All of this was a part of the art we made together, an aesthetic that we want to honour the makers and what is made.

# WHERE THE HEART IS 2012

## Theme

Love and place

Our theme was love, something we had heard so many stories about over the years. We wanted to link it to place. Not just the particular streets of East London, but also the locations we all associated with love: parks, home, cafés, churches, synagogues and mosques, pubs, community centres and kitchens. The many themes that grew from the project title were subdivided into six sub themes.

- Heartfelt (passion, faith, politics, women's struggle)
- Heartache (loss and separation)
- Heart sparkle (romance, excitement)
- Heartstrings (family)
- Heart's ease (friendship)
- Heartlands (belonging and place)

The performance was presented as part of LIFT 2012 (London International Festival of Theatre) as part of their 'London Voices' weekend.

## Art forms

Audio, film and text

In the first part of the project the group worked mostly from the Library archive material, and on an unpacking of their own concept of love, sharing many stories and experiences with each other. They were also introduced to filming each other and to hearing their own, recorded voices. Once they had decided on the sub-themes, they began work on the short silent films that were to be signposts for the audio walk that we were creating. This involved going out on location in small groups, which added richness to our mapping of stories onto the locality. The participants were all consulted following the rough edits of both sound and film, and sections were removed as a result of this consultation. One adult, for example, did not like the way that she appeared in one film; to her eyes she looked lost and confused, and she did not want this image to reinforce a sense of older people as lost and confused. A younger woman decided that her story could not be heard publicly, but asked for a copy of the audio to keep.

Page opposite: *Tea table for audience and participants at the Library*



ance

torture

ven

jump

jus

## Artists

Sue Mayo (text and direction), Lesley Pinder (film), Jules Wilkinson (sound).

Volunteer, Holly O'Neill

Map illustrator, Jane Porter

Research and production assistant, Ben du Preez

Production Manager, Tom Barnecut

Participation Producer at LIFT, Erica Campayne

## Participants

Seven adults participated, six of whom had done the project before.

Seven young women, all from Year 9, participated.

## Materials

Our archive materials related to the life of Sylvia Pankhurst because her life contained so many different aspects of what love might mean. A talented visual artist, she prioritised her campaigning work for the cause of Suffrage, a theme which got the group thinking about their passions and what they would or wouldn't give up for them. One of the adults had, for example, been on the brink of a recording career, but gave it up when she became engaged to be married. One of the young women is a very talented dancer, but knows that this cannot be a career choice for her, because of her family's feelings about its appropriateness. Sylvia was passionate about the East End, as were many of the group, and she defied convention by having a child out of wedlock at the age of 44. Through looking at her life, we were able to hugely expand what the group had at first thought the theme might reveal. Initially the young women assumed that the adults had far more knowledge of love. But when our joint A to Z of love revealed 93 kinds of love, the girls joined in much more equally and confidently. One of the girls remarked that discovering how many aspects of love there are was her biggest bit of learning on the project.

Not surprisingly, the theme of love brought up stories that really mattered to people. Some were positive, tender and affirming; others reflected pain, separation and disappointment. The group showed an extraordinary capacity to listen and receive each other's experiences without comment or criticism, and to weather occasional storms and difficult moments. We could observe the impact on individuals in the group when they had shared stories. One of the girls who been ambivalent about the project, (and who at one point left for a week and then returned) changed considerably after sharing her experiences with one of the older women. She then became completely committed and an advocate for the project. The relationships between the young and older women seemed infused with affection, perhaps partly because of the theme.

## Outcome

This year we were invited to present our work as part of the LIFT Festival. LIFT presents a bi-annual festival where 'London is the stage'. We therefore presented the work over two days, to a larger audience than usual.

We created six podcasts and six silent films, which together formed an audio walk around the Library, in the Aldgate and Brick Lane area. The films were placed in locations that related to the theme: the Heartache film in an empty shop, Heartsparkle on a giant flat screen in a shop window. The audience could follow a map, printed on a handkerchief, and listen to the audio on headphones, as they walked, or as they watched the short films (see photo below). They then returned to the Library to have tea with the participants, and to share their own stories of love.

*A really lovely way to spend an afternoon. The filming and the audio were great, thought provoking, sad and even funny. Then to meet the participants for tea and cake afterwards brought meaning to the whole project.*

Mark Ball, Artistic Director, LIFT

*I lived near Brick Lane for four years and 'Where the Heart is' made me see and feel the area in a whole new light. I discovered roads I have never walked down and heard beautiful, heartfelt and uplifting stories. I had time as I moved through the streets to re-discover where my own heart was through the stories of others, who were then brought to life through the wonders of images.*

Audience feedback

We also created digital images of blue plaques to celebrate all the participants. The text in praise of each person was written by others in the group.

The scale of this project was challenging, but we employed a Production Manager to support the needs of the project and this was a huge help.



### Thoughts on Where the Heart is: Place

While much of our reflection on place was generic, all of the participants live in East London, and their experiences of the streets and buildings suffused the project. One of the young women lived on Brick Lane, and became an excellent location scout, visiting friends and relatives up and down the street.

Others had knowledge of the area from other times, and the layering of stories enabled the locality to be seen in a very 3-dimensional way, even those with a deep local knowledge learning new stories and pieces of information. Time frames collapsed, when women 70 years apart in age discussed playing with their friends in front of their block of flats.

The building on Brick Lane that was once a Huguenot Chapel, and then a Synagogue, and now a Mosque, stands for much of the sense of shifting influences in the area, something that not everyone is comfortable with all the time. But the discovery that more than half of the group were born in The Royal London Hospital reminded the group of location as roots. The girls are aware that they function in a very dominantly Bangladeshi environment, and their discoveries of stories from other perspectives and times, and their chance to walk around the neighbourhood with the adults, disturbed in a very positive way their understanding of East London.

*To be honest we don't know many people of other cultures, and we never dreamed they would know these streets as well as we did.*

Mulberry student

It was during this project that we learned about the proposed changes at The Women's Library, the plan to move the collection to another location. For the girls, working in the Library for the first time, the news had limited impact. But for the women who had been involved in the project for some time there was real shock, and I understood more clearly how important to them it was that this national repository of Women's' History was in their neighbourhood. They would not follow the collection to its new home in Holborn; the localness was very important. As with the collection, the specialness of the place, The Women's Library, transfers to the group. They and their stories are special because they are told in that place. We were also aware that for the entire group the boundary between the identity of the projects and the identity of the Library was very blurred, since the projects had created all of their access to The Women's Library.

# WILD, WILD WOMEN 2013

## Theme

Women who cause a stir to make a difference

It felt very appropriate to end these ten years with the idea of wildness – when women have crossed a line, not just for the sake of it, but for the sake of the wider community of women and men. When The Women’s Library was occupied by women protesting at its closure, on International Women’s Day, and for three subsequent days, most of the group said, “I wish I’d known – I’d have been there!” In addition to our research in the Library, and the group’s own stories, the very current story of Malala Yousafzai, the Pakistani schoolgirl shot by the Taliban for attending School was often referenced.

## Art forms

Puppetry, writing and performance

## Artists

Polly Beestone (puppetry), Sue Mayo (performance)

Guest artist, Zoe Palmer (song)

Volunteer, Kate Treadell

## Participants

Eight older women participated, six of whom had done the project before. Eight young women from Year 9 participated.

## Materials

Indy Bhullar, Librarian at The Women’s Library, assisted us with research, and ran a session linking our project to The Library’s collection. This framed our research within a struggle for independence and voice for women that had been going on for a long time, and opened up the theme beyond that of the groups’ own desires to be, and fears of being, wild. Campaigning badges proved particularly stimulating. We also looked more particularly at Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), which we presented through a series of edited quotations. The group related strongly to her writing and we thought of her as our ‘wise wild woman’.

Wanting to open up our range of women who had pushed the boundaries in order to effect change, we launched a Twitter campaign, #wildwildwomen, with the ambition of collecting 1000 stories. In the end we only received a little over 100, but they were really interesting, so we have no regrets about not hitting the very ambitious target.



## Outcome

The group created a live performance, using text and puppetry. Starting with our traditional tea party, the group asked the audience about the times they had bent or broken rules, using a game we had used frequently in the project, 'Never have I ever'. As people shared mostly minor misdemeanors a sense of complicity, laughter and support was created. The piece used figures of all the women we had learned about through our Twitter campaign, and the group's text was drawn from their own writing, in particular work they had done about how they see themselves as women, what they want and what drives them. Zoe Palmer wrote a song for the group based on their texts. Of all the projects we have done, this was the one that focused most on the situation of women in the world, rather than on the personal stories and experiences from within the group. Although this was not the intention at the start of the project, it seemed a fitting way to end a project where our place as women was a constant thread.

*It was universal, but with its feet firmly on the ground. They looked as if they had shared a lot before arriving at the bigger themes.*

Audience feedback

## Thoughts on Wild, Wild Women: Women's Issues

*Some women fought for us, and things are not finished. We've got to continue. We tend to think it's done and it's not done!*

Adult participant

In the third week of the project we looked at the Library's handling collection with Librarian Indy Bhullar. Although it was early on in the project, three people in the group, two adults and one young woman, spoke about their experience of domestic violence when they saw a badge that was part of a campaign for shelters for abused women. This was an important reminder that the issues we speak about in relation to women are not only out there, in the wider world, but near at hand. Many of the adults had experienced challenges in their lives, but few had been able to give any time to thinking about their lives in the context of sexism or the feminist movement. The young women go to a School where women's issues are openly discussed, but they too were startled by some of what the research revealed. One young woman was horrified to discover that there was prostitution in London, as she thought that this was only present in 'underdeveloped countries'. But the dominant feeling was one of growing confidence and power, as revealed in some of the performance texts.

*I am who I am*

*I am not going to change myself to please you*

*I cannot be with people who make me feel less confident*

*I am a strong woman*

Almitra Simpson

*I will not be tamed  
I will break free  
I will not let you be harmed  
With one hand I keep you safe  
With the other I push forward*

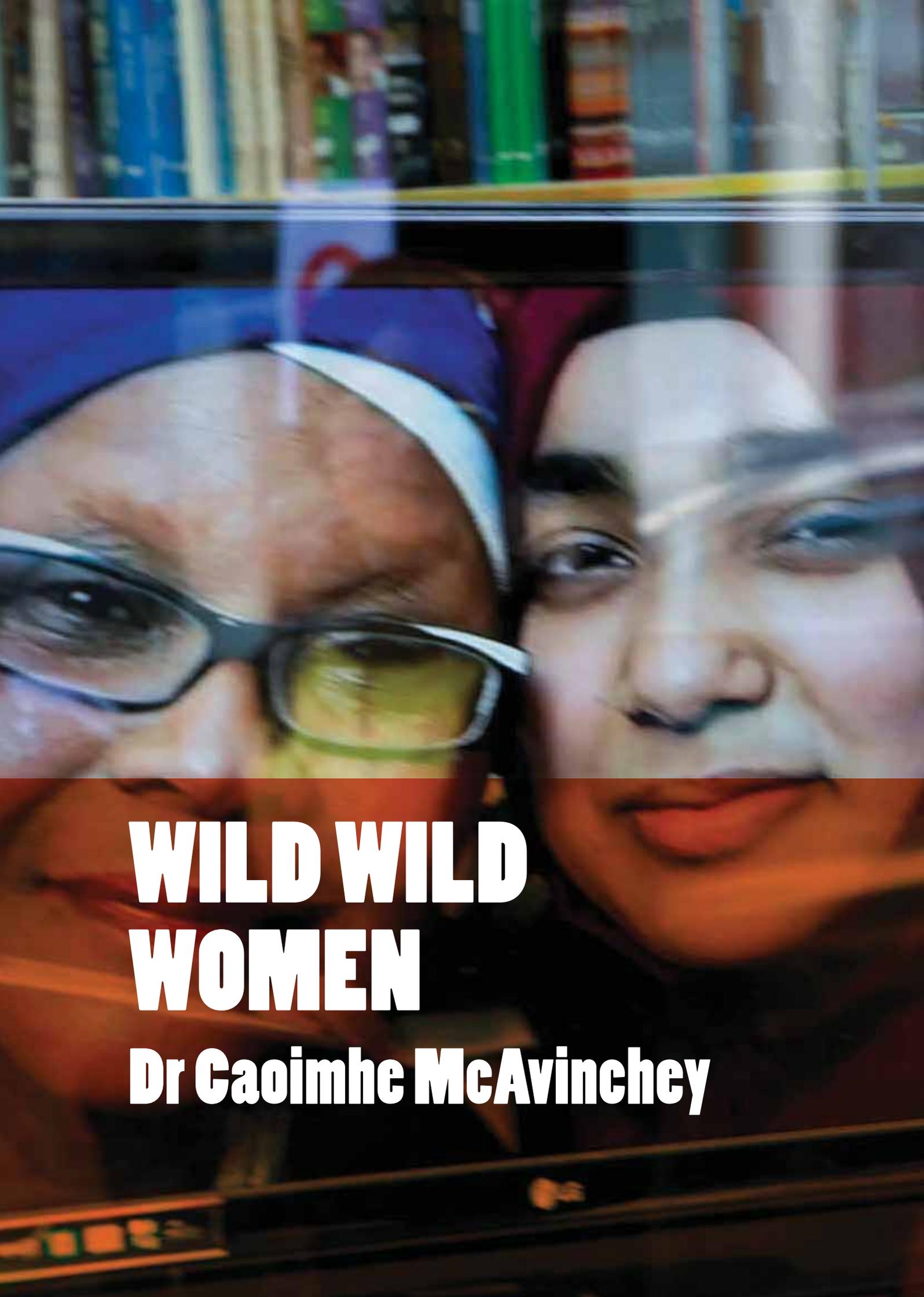
Roberta Stewart

The project did not allow us to go deeply into the complexities of relationships between women and men, and we have never discussed feminism as a movement. But being in the presence of a collection that tells the stories of so many women, through the personal and the political, receiving all the tweets that told stories of courage and imagination and ambition, and hearing from each other undoubtedly made the participants think of themselves within a frame of gender. When asked if we should 'still' be doing women's projects nowadays, with the inference that things have moved beyond that, some participants cited the attack on Malala Yousafzai, apparently for campaigning for education for herself and all girls, others unequal pay rates for women, and others the fact that not all women in the world can vote yet. Underlying these examples were the stories the group had shared from their own experiences. One girl told me, "I think I am a feminist now!" The spirit of this empowerment was very much in line with Mary Wollstonecraft:

*I do not wish them [women] to have power over men; but over themselves.*

*I've learnt a lot – about being a woman, what we have, what we do. I think we're wonderful.*

Mulberry student



**WILD WILD  
WOMEN**

**Dr Caoimhe McAviney**

Ten Years of Intergenerational Arts Practice at The Women's Library led by Magic Me in collaboration with Mulberry School for Girls and local, older women.

## **1. Introduction: Magic Me at The Women's Library (2004-2013)**

- 1.1 Rationale for research and research questions.
- 1.2 Research contexts
  - 1.21 A decade in context
  - 1.22 An ageing population
  - 1.23 Women
  - 1.24 Arts and older people
  - 1.25 East London & Tower Hamlets.
- 1.3 Research methodologies and structure of the report

## **2. The Women's Library Project Partners**

- 2.1 Magic Me
- 2.2 Mulberry School for Girls
- 2.3 The Women's Library
  - 2.31 The Women's Library – The Collection
  - 2.32 The Women's Library – The Building
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## **3. Structured Spaciousness – An Approach to Intergenerational Arts Practice**

- 3.1 Structured spaciousness within each project
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## **4. Working with a women-only intergenerational group**

- 4.1 The personal is political
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## **6. Wild Wild Women – Findings**

## **7. Bibliography**

## 1. Introduction: Magic Me at The Women's Library (2004-2013)

*Wild Wild Women* documents and reflects on Magic Me's ten years of work at The Women's Library. By giving access to both the process and critical reflections on it, it is hoped that the document supports artists, researchers, and educational and arts organisations interested in developing intergenerational work in and with cultural collections.

In the first section of the report Sue Mayo invites us into the detail of each of the projects: the themes explored, the materials from The Women's Library collection that acted as a catalyst for dialogue, and the creative responses developed and shaped through collaboration with the participants. Sue Mayo's perspective, as the lead artist and project manager who initiated, brokered and developed the projects, gives us a uniquely informed and overarching sense of a body of work that continually offered new understandings about the challenges and opportunities within it. This section of the report addresses particular questions that run across the decade of practice, focusing on specific questions about Magic Me's approach to intergenerational arts practice, informal learning within this women's only project and working in cultural collection contexts. It is informed by observation and analyses of live work and archive material, interviews with artists, participants and key partner staff and is supported by research and policy in the fields of arts, education, intergenerational studies and cultural policy.

Each of the projects has brought together an extraordinary group of young, mainly Muslim women and older women with diverse cultural heritages and experiences. They have been supported by a team of artists and staff from Magic Me, Mulberry School for Girls and The Women's Library who have generously spoken about their experiences of working together. The voices of these women – individually and collectively – are at the very core of The Women's Library project. There is a commitment in this report to the politics and spirit of the project – it is informed by and textured with the rich range of voices from The Women's Library projects. Their experience, expertise and perspective fundamentally shaped ten years of intergenerational work at The Women's Library.

This publication is situated within the wider context of Magic Me's commitment to developing and sharing new understandings about intergenerational arts practice. *Our Generations* was a three-year programme developing and testing new models of intergenerational arts practice and work with older, isolated individuals. The findings of this programme were published in a report that combined a project-by-project overview, written by Kathryn Gilfoy, the Programme Manager, with a critical reflection of key findings developed through it, written by myself. *Detail & Daring: The Art and Craft of Intergenerational Arts Practice* (2012), written by Sue Mayo, is an analysis of the *Weekend at Wiltons'*

project, a collaboration with experimental cabaret performance company Duckie, and examines the specific qualities and characteristics that different art forms can bring to intergenerational arts practice in particular contexts. This report builds upon the research findings of both *Our Generations* (2009) and *Detail and Daring* (2012) continuing Magic Me's commitment to investigating key questions that underpin its practice: What works in intergenerational arts practice? Why? And how? This new knowledge is not just of benefit for the organisation but for a range of audiences in arts, education and social care who want to know more about the political and aesthetic possibilities of this work and the practicalities of initiating and developing it.

This report is accompanied by a micro-site within the Magic Me website dedicated to The Women's Library projects. It features a short documentary film about the project and a series of short talking-head films with participants made by the filmmaker Lesley Pinder [www.magicme.co.uk].

## 1.1 Rationale for research.

The Women's Library project has a number of distinctive characteristics that both define it and contribute to its extraordinariness. One of the most unusual features of the project is its duration across a decade, from 2004-2013. This sustained commitment to the development of a project in a particular place (The Women's Library), working in a particular way (intergenerational, single gender and with materials from a cultural collection), with consistent partners was, in part, made possible because a significant number of key staff and older participants were involved across the lifespan of the work. This unique set of circumstances offers an opportunity to examine the evolution of the project and consider how learning about intergenerational arts practice in cultural collection contexts may be extrapolated and potentially applied by others wishing to develop this work. Susan Langford, Director of Magic Me, summarised the impetus for carrying out this research when she said,

*This project has always generated a very diverse group of people and its felt like a really rich seam for Magic Me to tap to understand intergenerational work. A part of that is having Sue run it every year and her thoughtfulness, her expertise, her coming back and doing it again in the same place and noticing what's different. With Magic Me it always seems like there's so many variables so it's quite hard to compare and contrast in some ways: even if it's Care Home A with School A, compared with Care Home B and School B, the schools are so different to each other that you get a completely different project even if you did the same thing with the same artists. Whereas, going back to the same space every year, having some of the same older women come back but having different girls has felt like a really useful place to keep thinking: what is this all about? Having it one gender makes it quite particular in terms of the relationships: what that's all about? It*

*hasn't always been easy to keep The Women's Library project going. We finish a project in June and we've got to start fundraising for the next one before we've finished the last one. But it's something I've dug into the reserves for if we haven't got the money that we hoped we were going to get, because it's felt very important for Magic Me. <sup>1</sup>*

This sense of the rich learning developed through the project both for the individual participants and the partner organisations was reiterated by Mulberry School for Girls, The Women's Library and the older women who participated in the project. Dr Vanessa Ogden, Headteacher of Mulberry School for Girls, is adamant about the importance of the project for the girls and the school. When I asked her, 'If the Magic Me Women's Library project hadn't happened, what would be missing in the life of the school?', she replied,

*It's a really hard question to answer because it sounds like it was only a small group of girls – how can it possibly have a universal impact on the school? But it certainly does. The creative energy that comes from the project existing amongst ten students within a year group has a life that is difficult to quantify but it's critical really. The learning those young women bring back is distributed across the school. Without the Magic Me Women's Library project there would be a big gap.<sup>2</sup>*

Gail Cameron, the Curator at The Women's Library (2002-2012) who witnessed the development of the collaboration across the decade, considered the institutional learning developed through this collaboration. She recognised that, through this project, The Women's Library developed a deeper understanding of its place, not only as a repository and research centre for Women's History but as a part of its locality.

*I think there is something about feeling that you're more a part of the place in which your building happens to be. We've had so many of the Mulberry schoolgirls through our door. Each year, it's so lovely to see this new group of students coming through in their maroon uniforms and then seeing this core group of elders – it makes the institution feel more rooted.<sup>3</sup>*

When I asked the older women in *Where the Heart is* what this project meant to them there was an urgent chorus of voices shouting, 'Everything!' As Marion Davies elaborated, there were nods and sounds of agreement from the other women:

*It's so important to me. It's something I look forward to and the weeks that it's not on, there's something missing for me. It's a place I feel comfortable,*

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1 Susan Langford, Interview, 18th June 2012.

2 Vanessa Ogden, Interview, 7th June 2013.

3 Gail Cameron, Interview, 28th November 2012.

*I can talk as I want to talk – you can't always talk to family like you can talk to friends. It means so much to me, especially as I've gotten older and a lot of my friends have gone. Life becomes a bit miserable because although my brain is about 30 – a nice age – my body is 130: so it's not that I can go out and about like I used to. This is what I really look forward to and I'd cancel anything else that would interfere with it.<sup>4</sup>*

It is clear from the partners' and participants' reflection on their relationships with and experience of The Women's Library project that it has played a considerable role in the lives of individuals and institutions and this section of the report examines the significance of the learning from the project.

## 1.2 Research Contexts

The Women's Library project spanned the decade from 2004-2013. During this time there were a number of social, political and economic events that informed the context of the project, both directly and indirectly.

### 1.21 A decade in context

It was a decade that celebrated the launch of Facebook (2004), the election of Barack Obama, the USA's first black president (2008), and the passing of laws supporting equal rights for same-sex couples to marry (2013). But it was also a decade where natural disasters including the Indian Ocean Tsunami, man-made wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, genocide in Darfour and famine in Somalia continued to devastate countries, displacing millions from their homes. The global recession induced economic hardship and social fracture in many countries across the world whilst the continued threat of terrorism fuels fear, protectionism and isolation as well as reiterating preconceptions and stereotypes about cultural, racial and faith differences.

### 1.22 An Ageing Population

In Britain, over the course of the last century, a period that not only encompasses two world wars but also seismic developments in health care, there has been a demographic revolution – more people are living for longer. The 2011 Census confirmed that one in six people in England and Wales is over 65 years old.<sup>5</sup> Strikingly, there are now more people over 65 than under 16 and there has been an exponential growth in the number of people living into their ninth decade: in 1911, the census recorded 13,000 people over 90 and a century later, that figure grew to more than 430,000.<sup>6</sup> Within this age group, there are almost three times as many women (315,000) as men (114,000). Over the past decade there has been increased attention paid to

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4 Marion Davies, Interview, 23rd May 2012.

5 2011 Census: Population Estimates for the United Kingdom, 27 March 2011, p. 1 ([http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171778\\_292378.pdf](http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171778_292378.pdf)) (accessed 5th July 2013).

6 2011 Census: Population Estimates for the United Kingdom, 27 March 2011. [http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171778\\_292378.pdf](http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171778_292378.pdf) (accessed 5th July 2013).

an ageing population. Charities such as Age UK acknowledge and celebrate this development whilst researching and campaigning to support government and society's understanding of the practical, social and cultural impact of this. Despite success in invigorating public debate about the implications of the demographic revolution there is still concern that ageism infuses older people's lived experience – from their day to day encounters with people through to the blinkered vision of national and local government that has failed to recognise the financial implications of longer life or the health or social care to support people in living independently.<sup>7</sup>

However, over the past decade, there has been a greater acknowledgement of the importance of intergenerational work in addressing issues of social and cultural exclusion. The Beth Johnson Foundation's Centre for Intergenerational Practice has led a number of national and international initiatives to promote understanding of intergenerational practice as a catalyst for social change particular in community development: the European Map of Intergenerational Learning (EMIL) and International Consortium for Intergenerational Programmes (ICIP) give a snapshot of developments in policy and practice internationally.<sup>8</sup>

### 1.23 Women

Despite the fact that, over the past 100 years, women have, across most parts of the world, made substantial legal, social and cultural progress with greater autonomy and access to education and employment, there are still significant markers of inequality. In the UK, the economic disparity between men and women is stark: there is a 15% gender pay gap; two-thirds of people who earn less than £7 per hour are women; and whilst men's unemployment is decreasing, women's unemployment has risen to a 26 year high.<sup>9</sup> A recent report from The Fawcett Society, a major voice in the campaign for women's equality in all aspects of life in Britain, reviewed women's participation in the labour market in Britain, illustrating the significant negative impact of global recession and how this is exacerbated by gender inequity within wider societal structures.<sup>10</sup> Recent cuts to the public sector have impacted disproportionately on women and 'around three-quarters of the money being cut' from current government benefits is coming from 'women's pockets'.<sup>11</sup>

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7 House of Lords Committee on Public Service and Demographic Change (2013) *Ready for Ageing?* (London: White Hall).

8 For more information see The Beth Johnson Foundation's Centre for Intergenerational Practice, <http://www.centreforip.org.uk>; The European Map of Intergenerational Learning, <http://www.emil-network.eu>; International Consortium for Intergenerational Programmes, <http://www.icip.info>

9 Fawcett Society: <http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/new-report-warns-of-female-unfriendly-labour-market-as-womens-unemployment-continues-to-rise/#sthash.NRPC28Sb.dpuf> (accessed 14th August 2013).

10 The Fawcett Society (2013) 'The changing labour market: delivering for women, delivering for growth' (London: Fawcett Society).

11 Fawcett Society, 'Cutting Women Out' <http://uat.fawcettsociety.org.uk/cutting-women-out/> (accessed 14th August 2013).

Although, the Magic Me projects were women-only and took place in an institution that declared its commitment to preserving and offering public access to materials about the lives of women, it was only in 2013 that the words 'feminist' or 'feminism' were explicitly used by the participants. Whilst it is impossible to pinpoint exactly why this was the case, it is worth noting a resurgence in a public discourse that explicitly uses the term feminist when addressing issues of equality and human rights. At the time of writing, there have been a number of events covered in the media that illustrate how, despite, significant developments in gender equity in both domestic and public spheres of life, that misogyny, sexism and violence against women continue to be real, impactful issues that inform women's lived experiences and cultural representation: a thirteen year old girl who was the victim of sexual abuse was described as being 'predatory' by a prosecuting barrister; the writer, Caroline Criado-Perez and the Labour MP, Stella Creasy have, amongst other women, received threats of rape and death on twitter for organising or supporting the campaign to ensure that women were represented on banknotes after the Bank of England decided to replace Elizabeth Fry with Winston Churchill on new £5 banknotes;<sup>12</sup> and World Health Organisation research reveals that there is an epidemic of violence against women with over one in three women worldwide experiencing sexual or physical violence.<sup>13</sup>

### 1.24 Arts and Older People

Over the past three decades there has been a significant growth in arts practices with and for older people in a range of social, cultural and educational contexts. In particular, the flourishing of participatory arts practices with older people, evidenced in The Baring Foundation report, *Ageing Artfully: Older People and Professional Participatory Arts in the UK* (2009), a survey of arts organisations working explicitly with this demographic, gives some sense of the range of practices offered. The report details over 100 companies and includes projects developed by large-scale, high-profile institutions such as Tate Modern, Sage Gateshead and English National Ballet, as well as the work of smaller or regional organisations. The cumulative picture created by the report is of an arts sector that actively wants to engage with older people in innovative and meaningful ways.

This growth in arts practice with older people is part of a wider commitment by artists and arts organisations to offer greater access to the arts, partly fuelled by an agenda of creative cultural citizenship and given formalised propulsion with the election of the New Labour Government in 1997. As one of its first initiatives, it set up the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU). For New Labour, social exclusion, although related to poverty, had a distinct meaning; Tony Blair described the excluded as

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12 'Twitter under fire after bank note campaigner is target of rape threats' *The Guardian* 27th July 2013 (<http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2013/jul/27/twitter-trolls-threats-bank-notes-austen>) (accessed 14th August 2013).

13 World Health Organisation (2013) *Global and regional estimates of violence against women: Prevalence and health effects of intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence*,

those 'who do not have the means, material or otherwise to participate in social, economic, political and cultural life' (*The Economist* 4 December 1997). Arts practice involving older people became a direct beneficiary of this social policy, both in terms of funding but also as a philosophical foundation for the necessity of the work. Today, although the SEU is no more – its functions were absorbed by the Social Exclusion Task Force in 2006 and then the Office for Civil Society in 2010 – and current government funding priorities reject solutions perceived to be statist, the idea and challenges of social exclusion have become hard-wired into the thinking of arts organisations across all art forms, particularly those working in participatory arts.

This has led to a fundamental shift in both the perception and structural positioning of the arts off the cultural mainstage – in sites as varied as prisons and hospitals – with an emphasis on participation and collaboration. Concurrently with these developments in the field there has been a growth in research about arts practice with older people from a range of disciplinary perspectives – from arts, education, psychology and cultural policy.<sup>14</sup> In the UK, the recent launch of the Barings/Arts Council England programme, *Arts and Older People in Care*, investing £1 million in arts programmes in residential care between 2014-2017, evidences this growing recognition of an ageing demography and, in particular, the potential of the arts within care contexts.

### 1.25 East London & Tower Hamlets.

The Women's Library projects took place in a very particular socio-cultural and economic context. Magic Me, The Women's Library and Mulberry School for Girls are situated in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets: despite its proximity to the global businesses of the City of London and Canary Wharf, it is the third most deprived borough in England with deprivation being a daily experience for many. It is also one of the most densely populated and fast growing boroughs. Within this 56% of the population belong to an ethnic group other than white British and it has the largest Muslim population, mainly of Bangladeshi origin, in London.<sup>15</sup> Within the older population, 47% of people aged 65 and over, live alone (the national average is 33%). It is an area that has had, over the past two decades, a considerable financial investment directly related to the

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14 Helen Nicholson, (2009) 'Intergenerational reminiscence theatre' in *Applied theatre: International case studies*, ed. Monica Prendergast and Julie Saxon (Bristol: Intellect): 174-178; Helen Nicholson (2012) 'Making home work: Theatre making with older people in residential care'. *National Association for Drama in Education Journal*, Australia. 35: 47-62; Sue Mayo, S. (2013) 'A marvelous experiment: Exploring ideas of temporary community in an intergenerational performance project', in *Performance and Community: Commentary and case studies*, ed. Caoimhe McAvinchey (London: Methuen): 33-62; Caoimhe McAvinchey (2013) 'Coming of age: Arts practice with older people in private and domestic spaces' in *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, Vol 18:4; David Cutler (2012) *Tackling loneliness: A role for the arts* (London: Campaign to End Loneliness and the Baring Foundation); 509Arts (2010) *Adult participatory arts: Thinking it through* (London: Arts Council England); Mental Health Foundation (2011) *An evidence review of the impact of participatory arts on older people* (London: Mental Health Foundation).

15 Tower Hamlets Borough Statistics [http://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/lgsi/901-950/916\\_borough\\_statistics/ethnicity.aspx](http://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/lgsi/901-950/916_borough_statistics/ethnicity.aspx) (accessed 1st July 2013).



development of the Docklands area and, more recently, the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games. Reflecting on the transformation of East London – particularly its regeneration and gentrification – where Magic Me has been based for over twenty years, Susan Langford observed,

*there's constant change partly because it's the centre of London. East London is, in terms of the whole Shoreditch/Hoxton phenomenon, really hip and happening – it's where people want to be. It wasn't like that ten years ago and outsiders didn't come very much. There's been a real push [for regeneration] that has finally come to fruition. It impacts on the community in terms of the prices going up and the shops changing and not selling what you want: the frou-frou stuff is all very lovely if you're a visitor, but it doesn't feed the family.<sup>16</sup>*

The day-to-day lived experience of established communities impacted by the powerful economic forces of global attention and investment has been witnessed by some of the women who participated in the project who have lived in the area.

### **1.3 Research methodologies and structure of the report**

Although I formally began to research The Women's Library project in January 2011, I have, as part of a longer term interest in Magic Me's work, observed and participated as an audience member of Women's Library projects including

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<sup>16</sup> Susan Langford, Interview, 2nd May 2012.

*Utopia* (2009) and *Dressing Up* (2010). Between January 2012 and June 2013 I visited workshops and performances of *Where the Heart is* (2012) and *Wild Wild Women* (2013) and carried out interviews with staff at each of the partner organisations, participants and artists. Interviews included:

#### Magic Me

- Sue Mayo, lead artist and project manager (2nd May 2012, 28th July 2013)
- Susan Langford, Director of Magic Me (18th June 2012, 9th May 2013)
- Group interview with artists – Polly Beestone, Anita McKenzie, Surya Turner and Jules Wilkinson (9th May 2013)

#### Mulberry School for Girls

- Dr Vanessa Ogden, Headteacher, Mulberry School for Girls (4th June 2013)
- Jill Tuffee, Deputy Head, Mulberry School for Girls (4th June 2013)
- Jo Latham, Women's Education Officer 2012-2013, Mulberry School for Girls (4th June 2013, 4th July 2013)
- Shanaz Begum, Women's Education Officer 2010-2012, Mulberry School for Girls (4th June 2013)

#### The Women's Library

- Gail Cameron, Curator, Women's Library 2002-2012 (23rd November 2012)
- Tracey Weller, Education Officer, Women's Library (23rd June 2012)

#### Participants

- Group interview with Mulberry participants (*Wild Wild Women*, 7th June 2013)
- Kinza, Mulberry School for Girls (4th July 2013)
- Shania, Mulberry School for Girls (4th July 2013)
- Group interview with Older Women (*Where the Heart is*, 23rd May 2012)
- Winnie Roach, Older Women (4th July 2013)
- Rachel Ogunleye, Older Women (4th July 2013)
- Marion Davies, Older Women (4th July 2013)

#### London International Festival of Theatre

- Erica Campayne, LIFT Participation Producer (23rd May 2012)

It is important to acknowledge the names of each of the women who agreed to be interviewed as they individually and collectively realised the ambition for The Women's Library projects. These semi-structured interviews gave both an historical sweep of the project and revealed the considerable sense of personal and organisational commitment invested in it.

I have had full access to Magic Me's archive and Sue Mayo's personal archive of materials relating to the project. Each of the archives is informed by different perspectives on the project. Magic Me's archive has materials generated in the process of producing a project – production schedules, images, correspondence

between Magic Me and artists, feedback from audience, evaluation notes, end of project reports, lists of participants, press cuttings, video footage, images and audio recordings. Sue Mayo's archive has materials made during the project sessions – session plans with handwritten notes, typed-up texts of poems developed by the group, blossoms from the *Can I? I Can!* project, and postcards from women around the world contributing to *Utopia According to Me*. Together, these materials offered insight into the weekly process of each project as well as the organisational producing of it. Ellie Watmough, the research assistant on this project, and myself, had great pleasure in sifting our way through these materials, witnessing Sue Mayo and Susan Langford remember specific aspects of projects prompted by particular materials: portals to a rich memory of a moment in time, a room of personalities, the pleasures and challenges of a particular project.

The following section of the report introduces each of the partner organisations before then identifying and considering learning across the decade of work from a range of perspectives. Rather than separating the learning into 'each year of the project' or 'participants', 'artists' and 'partner organisations', the section of the report is organised into sections that address the questions:

- What are the characteristics of the artists' approach in The Women's Library projects?
- What are the possibilities offered through intergenerational arts practice in a library or heritage context?
- What is particular about working with women-only intergenerational groups?

A distillation of the Key Findings, of things that are specific to The Women's Library project but that may be usefully extrapolated and potentially employed by others working with intergenerational groups in cultural collections contexts, is in the conclusion.

## 2. The Women's Library Project Partners

This chapter addresses each partner organisation and the place of The Women's Library Project within their work.

### 2.1 Magic Me

Magic Me specialises in developing intergenerational arts practice and work with older people. Since 1989, under the pioneering vision and commitment of its founding director, Susan Langford, it has developed a network of partnerships across Tower Hamlets with schools, care homes, community centres, museums, galleries, artists and volunteers.

Whilst committed to the local, Magic Me has a national and international influence through its training and publications offered to a range of audiences working in arts, education, health and social care.<sup>17</sup> It has made a significant contribution to the social and cultural life of thousands of people in one of London's most diverse boroughs. Rather than merely acknowledging this complex socio-cultural context, Magic Me engages directly with it. It is helpful to have a sense of where The Women's Library project is situated within the overall work of Magic Me. In 2011/12, Magic Me ran 155 workshops and events with 603 people. Within this, nearly 25% of the participants were over 75 years of age. The following snapshot of recent projects gives some insight into the range, reach and innovation of the organisation's work in schools, day centres, residential homes and cultural venues across Tower Hamlets:

- *Digital Intimacy* (2013). This photography and movement project brought together younger and older gay men to explore their experiences of dating and relationships through the internet and mobile phone platforms. It was a partnership with Age UK Camden's Opening Doors Project and Gendered Intelligence.
- *Cocktails in Care Homes* is an ongoing and expanding project that responds to the absence of social activities in care homes in the evenings. Each participating care home has a monthly party for residents, their families and volunteers.
- *View from the Top* (2012). As part of the celebrations around London's Olympic and Paralympic Games, 100 school children and local older people created an artwork and soundscape which then decorated the upper ceiling of 27 buses on the Number 205 route which runs from the City of London towards the Olympic stadium.

This sample illustrates the ways in which Magic Me is committed to developing ambitious, responsive work that, increasingly, has a public audience beyond

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17 Within the last three years, Magic Me has delivered intergenerational training at the University of the Third Age (Poland), the University of Grenada (Spain) and in São Paulo as part of a British Council/SESC partnership, working with community learning and youth workers from across Brazil.

the family and friends of project participants. Within this, The Women's Library project is the one of a number of complex projects and partnerships initiated by Magic Me. Running across ten years it offers a spine of continuity within the work of the organisation.

## 2.2 Mulberry School for Girls

Mulberry School for Girls is a comprehensive secondary school for 1,400 girls aged 11-18. It is situated off a busy arterial road in the heart of Shadwell, surrounded by small food and clothing businesses in the shadow of major building works which evidence a continued investment in the development of this part of East London as an economic and cultural hub.

When I first visited the school and waited in the reception area, I was struck by two images: hand-drawn posters declaring the school's principles of 'creativity', 'confidence', 'leadership' and 'learning' alongside a quartet of clocks that display the time in London, New York, Tokyo and Delhi. This juxtaposition of images articulates the ethos of Mulberry School for Girls – it is rooted in the day-to-day lives of young women who live in a specific community and is committed to supporting their development as citizens of the world. This ethos is evidenced throughout both its curricular and extraordinary Extended Learning Programme: when I meet with Vanessa Ogden, the Head Teacher, and Jill Tuffee, the Deputy Head, they had just returned from a trip to New York with six students from Mulberry Films, the school's film making unit, who presented their film, *Justice in Action*, at the People's Film Festival. This film, which won the category of Best International Documentary at the festival, examines the history of Bosnia, the genocide, the experience of survivors and mercurial ideas of justice.



Mulberry School for Girls is a Specialist Arts school and offers an abundance of opportunities for students to develop a wide range of skills: in addition to Mulberry Films, there is Mulberry Radio which broadcasts features made by staff and students and Mulberry Theatre Company which has staged award winning premieres at Edinburgh Fringe and Southwark Playhouse. At the time of writing, the school had three artists in residence, the playwright Fin Kennedy, the filmmaker Marcus Hibbert and artist, Camille Cettina.

Mulberry's Extended Learning Programme offers opportunities for out-of-class learning through over 50 clubs, ranging from sports through the Model United Nations programme, in which the girls take on the role of ambassadors from different countries, developing their awareness of international relations and global politics. Mulberry has a residency at the South Bank Centre and run a youth conference and women's conference annually. In addition to this, Mulberry School for Girls commitment to local community learning is evidenced through the recent opening of the Mulberry and Bigland Green Centre, a partnership between Mulberry School for Girls, Bigland Green Primary School and the West Shadwell Children's Centre, providing health, education and training and support for children and families in the area. Jo Latham, the Women's Education Officer who supported students participating in the Magic Me Women's Library project in 2012 and 2013, explained why the school offers such a range of opportunities:

*Not every one has the means to fund things [like music or drama lessons] privately and independently, so we are making sure that every student here has those opportunities to develop and have fun. When they are applying to university they're at no disadvantage. But it's not just about getting into university, it's about developing their own wellbeing, their own sense of worth.*

*The overall majority of students take part in extracurricular activities. There's something for every single student, whatever they're interested in and whatever their skills are. It's open and inclusive and there are routes in for different levels in different clubs. We try to keep a track of which girls are involved and which girls are being selected for different things to make sure that opportunity is spread across the school. We talk with teachers who know the students well, to work out which students would really benefit from particular clubs or events.<sup>18</sup>*

This sense of care and ambition for the girls has been keenly felt both in the development of the relationship with Magic Me and in the selection and support of each girl who participated in The Women's Library project. Mulberry School staff were unanimous about the significance of the Magic Me Women's Library project for each student who participated – their personal development,

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18 Jo Latham, Interview, 4th June 2014.

their increased academic achievement – as well as the impact of the project throughout the school. Shanaz Begum, who supported the students prior to Latham, observed,

*The Magic Me Women’s Library project fits with everything that we do in terms of a strong ethos of self-expression and confidence building, of knowing your place in life and having your voice. I think Magic Me does that really, really well – it’s one of our most successful projects. You see the students go into it at first a little bit reluctant, saying ‘oh, I don’t want to help people go up the stairs or pull out a chair for them’. By the end of it, they come out and they feel equal to these extraordinary women in the community: they’re transformed. When I first started doing Magic Me, the group that I took were difficult, vulnerable girls, on the verge of being excluded from school. Magic Me was pivotal for them: firstly, to be selected to do this project, they were thinking, ‘why am I selected, it’s always the goody two-shoes that get selected to do these things’, and secondly, it was their own time with these exceptional women.<sup>19</sup>*

The intergenerational aspect of this project, its location off-campus and in the specific location of The Women’s Library working with the collection and through the arts created a context that was extraordinary. The following extract from an email written by Jill Tuffee, deputy head of Mulberry, in 2005, evidences how the richness of the project revealed itself early in the collaboration:

*The work that our students achieve with Magic Me involves a journey that it is not possible to make in school under the constraints of an already packed curriculum. It is an enrichment in so many ways: artistically, creatively, socially and in the field of human relationships. The bond that our young people form with the other women involved is a crucial experience for many of them in breaking stereotyped patterns of seeing older people and especially those from a different cultural context or background.<sup>20</sup>*

## 2.3 The Women’s Library

The Women’s Library referred to throughout this project and report was both a building and a collection of objects, pamphlets, books and scholarly works related to the lives of women, particularly in Britain in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In 2013, the final year of the project, the building was closed and the collection transferred from London Metropolitan University to the custodianship of the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). The collection is currently referred to as The Women’s Library @ LSE. News of the potential closure of The Women’s Library erupted during preparations for *Where the Heart is* (2012). The response from the

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19 Shanaz Begum, Interview, 4th June 2013.

20 Jill Tuffee, email to Sue Mayo, 2005.

public – from the women who participated in the project through to internationally recognised figures, revealed the importance of both the *idea* and actuality of The Women’s Library as a physical space which recognised and cared for the memories and legacy of the women whose lives were documented within it and shaped the world beyond it.

The importance of The Women’s Library as a place, a space and a collection for Magic Me’s project will be addressed later in the report however, a brief history both of the collection and its peripatetic life until the physical development of the library at Aldgate gives a context for its wider significance

### **2.31 The Women’s Library – The Collection**

Officially, The Women’s Library collection is:

a unique and internationally renowned collection that holds UNESCO-recognised documents. The collection covers the changing social and political circumstances in the lives of women from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. It is recognised for its rare and historic materials on the foundations of the rights of women. It developed from the suffrage movement and now includes over 60,000 books and pamphlets, over 3,500 periodicals as well as press cuttings. In addition it includes 500 personal and organisational archives and over 5,000 objects such as posters, photographs, badges and banners.<sup>21</sup>

It is home to the personal archives of extraordinary people, some of whom are firmly established in the history of feminism such as Elizabeth Garrett Anderson (1836-1917), the first woman to qualify as a physician and surgeon in Britain, and Emily Wilding Davison (1872-1913), the militant activist. Whilst the documentation of the suffragettes’ campaigns by the London National Society for Women’s Suffrage were the foundation of the collection, The Women’s Library is not limited to this, accommodating a range of materials related to the lives of women who contributed to a broader acknowledgment and understandings of the social, economic, cultural and political work of women across the 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

There are personal collections from Helena Normanton (1882-1957), the first woman to practice as a barrister in England and Wales, Barbara Cartland (1901-2000), one of the most prolific writers of romantic fiction in the twentieth century and Elaine Showalter (1941-), a key figure in the feminist literary criticism.

The collection also holds materials from campaigns including Greenham Common Women’s Peace Camp anti-nuclear weapon movement; the repeal of the Contagious Disease Acts (1864) that deemed prostitutes as vectors of disease rather than human beings to be treated with dignity; and Gingerbread, the charity supporting single parent families.

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21 The Women’s Library @ LSE: <http://www.lse.ac.uk/library/newsandinformation/newsArchive/2012/Womens-Library.aspx> (accessed 7th July 2013).

In addition to these larger personal or campaign collections that have some degree of public profile, there are thousands of objects, documents and images related to the lives of women who may not be familiar to a general public audience. Fanzines from Bunnies on Strike from the Netherlands, who describe themselves as 'radical cheerleaders and action group inspired by the 1990s Riot Grrrl [feminist punk] movement' give access to contemporary grassroots feminist movements whilst Gemma Romain, a Vera Douie Fellow (2011), researched materials within the library to document interwar Black histories, bringing marginalised voices within the collection to the foreground.<sup>22</sup>

Ultimately, our collective understanding about economic and civil rights, gender equity, lesbian activism and racial equality are greatly enhanced by the materials in The Women's Library.

### **2.32 The Women's Library – The Building**

On 1st January 1926 Vera Douie was appointed as the first librarian for the collection, then called the Women's Service Library, originally housed in a converted public house in Westminster. She held this post for 41 years caring for and developing the collection across the mid-twentieth century. After the building, though not the collection, was damaged by bombing in World War II it was rehoused and renamed as the Fawcett Library in 1957 in honour of Millicent Garrett Fawcett (1847-1949), the non-militant suffrage leader, and her daughter, Phillipa (1868-1948), a mathematician and progressive educationalist.

The Fawcett Society maintained the collection for twenty years until it no longer had the funds to do so. In 1977 the City of London Polytechnic, now London Metropolitan University, offered to house the collection. Over the next quarter of a century, the library, despite being housed in cramped and ill-fit conditions, expanded both its readership and collections. In 1998, the university won a £4.2 million Heritage Lottery Fund grant to develop a new, purpose-built space and the architect, Clare Wright, reimagined the East End wash houses in Old Castle Street in Aldgate to create a new building which offered greater public and specialist access to the collections, with a reading room, café, education and exhibition space. The collection was, once again, renamed: The Women's Library opened to the public in 2002.

In the Spring of 2012, London Metropolitan University announced that it would no longer financially resource The Women's Library and custodianship of the collection was put out to tender. The Save The Women's Library Campaign blog and coverage in national papers illustrates the shock and dismay at the potential implications of this, particularly the separation of the collection from the building and the library staff with their specific expertise.

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<sup>22</sup> Gemma Romain, <http://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/researching-at-the-womens-library/> (25th April 2012) (accessed 6<sup>th</sup> July 2013).

*The Women's Library is an international treasure and must be kept intact and open to researchers and visitors. Its holdings offer scholars from many countries, including my own (the USA) and those from continental Europe, indispensable insight into issues in women's and gender history, and not only those of Great Britain. Its holdings include papers from the International Council of Women, the Josephine Butler papers (International Abolitionist Federation), and many other organisations and individuals whose contributions to the advancement of women cannot be overestimated.*

Karen Offen, Historian & Senior Scholar, The Clayman Institute for Gender Research, Stanford University, USA.

*The imminent closure of the Library, which has been cast to the winds in a time of economic austerity, like a dirty old sock that has no further use, will have a devastating effect on women's and gender studies in higher education in this country, and internationally. It is time for this Coalition Government to show a commitment to preserving the rich heritage of half of the human race by supporting the Library – and its invaluable collections.*

Professor June Purvis, University of Portsmouth<sup>23</sup>

The women who participated in *Where the Heart is* (2012) joined the protest and wrote a letter which was published in *The Guardian* (5 May 2012),

**Women's archive is as relevant today as the struggles it records**

Thank you for raising awareness regarding the crisis facing the Women's Library (Women's archive hunts for a saviour, 1 May). Over 50 years ago the Guardian's Mary Stott was instrumental in founding our organisation - the National Women's Register - the then Housewives Register. Our archive is housed by the library and we would be saddened if access to our history was restricted along the lines proposed. The worry is that this could be the thin end of the wedge with the collection as a whole under threat. Can I urge your readership to join the e-petition and in Sandi Toksvig's words "save this national treasure".  
**Pam McKee**  
*National Women's Register*

● When one considers the number of well-endowed military museums stuffed full of the celebration of slaughter and toys for the boys, the contrast

to the threat to the one national archive recording the struggles of women over four centuries is all the more distressing. Then there is the Trade Union Congress library. It is fitting that these two records of the fight for basic rights and greater equality are housed in the same place and no surprise that it is under the Cameron administration that they come under threat. Could not the British Library take these two nationally important collections under its wing?  
**Kate Macintosh**  
*Winchester, Hampshire*

● We have been coming to the library for nine years, using the fantastic collection to get us thinking and talking. We are a group of women aged from 14 to 80 and it is relevant to us all. Women's voices are important and we women want our voices heard today. The building was once a wash house. It was important to the community then and it

is now. Like the suffragettes before us, we will not give in.  
**Winnie Roache, Rachel Ogunleye, Marion Davies and eight others**  
*Women's Library project group, Magic Me*

● Malcolm Gillies, vice-chancellor of London Metropolitan Library, sets up a false opposition when he says that more outsiders use the Women's Library than do his own students. Of course they do, because it's a research library. As such, it brings academics, and not only academics, from all over the world to use its resources, and this alone brings great distinction to Mr Gillies's university. If LMU cannot see a way to support this excellent specialist library, some other institution must be given the chance. To measure the profile of an academic library by the footfall of students is a sad commentary on the university's culture.  
**Alan Shelston**  
*Cheshire*

<sup>23</sup> Save The Women's Library Blog <http://savethewomenslibrary.blogspot.co.uk/p/testimonies.html> (accessed 6th July 2013).

Ultimately, economics overruled any ideological consideration to maintain the collection, building and staff of The Women's Library in one place, together. LSE took over custodianship of the collection in 2013 and it is now housed within their library for political and economic science at Holborn, in the centre of London. One of the union representatives for the staff of The Women's Library summed up a general sense of disappointment when he said, "Women deserve a library of their own, and the fourth floor of an already existing library doesn't do it justice."<sup>24</sup> However, Dr Anne Summers, the Chair of the Friends of The Women's Library was more sanguine about the situation, mindful of the many homes that the collections has already had when she spoke at a reception hosted by LSE celebrating the acquisition of the collection, Libraries, archives and museums are collections of inanimate objects, but they also have their organic aspect. They are the emanations of people's lives; and the best of them are always evolving. This is more true of The Women's Library than of most, for it is the emanation of a continuing social and political movement, and one which of course predates and exists independently of any fixed institutional arrangements of bricks and mortar.

*The Library was never, and was never meant to be, a mere collection of souvenirs. Certainly the collections bear witness to past achievements, and to a strong sense of women's entry into public and political history. That is one reason why at the end of World War I many suffragists were eager to deposit their records of war work there, and why memorabilia of the militant suffragettes also found their way into the collections. But although women's history and The Women's Library are often associated in the popular imagination with the (often literally) fiery exploits of the suffragettes and the militant campaign for the vote, this is an image which is in some ways frozen in time; whereas the women who created the Library were always intensely concerned with the present and the future.<sup>25</sup>*

Summers' comment that 'the women who created the Library were always intensely concerned with the present and the future' is a helpful introduction to thinking about contemporary usage of the collection.

### **2.33 Magic Me at The Women's Library**

In addition to attracting and supporting the work of scholars, nationally and internationally, the organisation was committed to developing pathways into the building and its collection through its education and outreach work led by the Education Officer. The schools programme linked to the National Curriculum, particularly history, sociology and citizenship as well as supporting A level students in workshops such as 'How to Use a Research Library'. Much of the

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24 Max Watson, Unison representative in 'LSE saves Women's Library from closure], in *The Guardian* 28<sup>th</sup> September 2012. [<http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2012/sep/28/lse-saves-womens-library-closure>] (accessed 6th July 2013).

25 Dr Anne Summers, The Women's Library @ LSE Reception, 26 February 2013

community based work linked with existing women's groups or projects in Tower Hamlets, partnering with programmes such as the Geffrye Museum or Stitches in Time. Tracey Weller, the Education Officer who supported the last two Magic Me projects at The Women's Library observed,

*Magic Me is different – it's one of the few groups that is particularly mixed: you have the younger women who are predominantly Bangladeshi working with older traditional East End women, a few women from an Afro-Caribbean background and some from an Asian background. It's also the only group where it's mixed in terms of age.*

Significantly, a considerable amount of informal or community based learning initiated by The Women's Library was anchored in textile or craft work with sessions in a particular room in the building. In contrast, each of the Magic Me projects was informed by a commitment to performance, curating creative responses to the collection articulated through a range of media – sculpture, puppets, audio, visual, movement and text. Throughout the decade of partnership, the participants not only went to The Women's Library to meet and investigate its collection, but rather they put themselves *into* The Women's Library – performing in spaces across the building, from more hidden, contained education rooms on the ground floor through to the spacious, bright and revered space of the reading room on the top floor of the building. This sense of the organisation, building and collection welcoming and accommodating the women and the project reveals much about the distinctive nature of the project and the growing relationship of trust, challenge and ambition that evolved between The Women's Library, Mulberry School for Girls and Magic Me.

### 3. Structured Spaciousness – An Approach to Intergenerational Arts Practice

Each project and each session within The Women’s Library projects is characterised by its structured spaciousness. There is a robust scaffold that supports the building of the creative practice without dictating or prescribing what it may look like, the direction it takes or the content within it. Because the framework is secure, it gives participants and artists the confidence to test and explore ideas within it. Partners, participants and artists have all commented on the pleasure and the challenge of working on The Women’s Library projects: in being part of a collaborative venture that is clearly framed but depends on each person’s contribution to realise it. The following sections illustrate examples of structured spaciousness in a project, a session and an exercise within it.

#### 3.1 Structured Spaciousness within each project

Within a project the structure was informed by a number of known entities:

- The project partners: each year that the partner organisations renewed and continued their commitment to the project was a further acknowledgement of the importance they gave to it. This ongoing partnership allowed for the accumulation of knowledge that could be applied each year. There was also, increasingly, a sense of the project having both a history and a future that contributed towards a sense of momentum and confidence in it.
- The lead artist: as the lead artist and project manager on each of the ten projects Sue Mayo had vision, embodied knowledge and continuity that threaded each of the individual projects together into a coherent body of work. Over the decade she developed and shared her knowledge of ways of working with an all-women intergenerational group: the possibilities of The Women’s Library as a catalyst for rich creative response; the particularities of each of the partner organisations; and the character, needs and interests of each of the older women who returned to the project.
- The timeframe: the timeframe of the project reflected the practical needs of its participants. Generally, it ran after school one day a week for three to four months, from February to May. (There was some variation in the earlier projects as the practical principles developed.) The weekly meetings were usually 1.5-2 hours long, with an intensive day or weekend session over the Easter school holidays usually culminating in a public event, with an increasing commitment to and ambition for performance. This structure gave everyone a very clear sense of the arc and rhythm of each project.
- The venue: the group always met at The Women’s Library – a space that was home to the project rather than either of the groups of participants. For the participants coming to the project, to the building, there was no prescribed way of being or doing – it was a place where the group developed their own way of working.

- The catalyst for creative response: the materials from The Women’s Library collection were different in each project and always offered a catalyst for creative response rather than prescribed learning.
- The women-only character of the group.
- The intergenerational character of the group.
- Sue Mayo considered the particular art form that might work well with a specific theme and then which artists, drawn from the pool of Magic Me artists, would be most appropriate. One of the most significant elements of each project’s success was that the artists had experience of working in intergenerational contexts and/or having had participated in Magic Me’s Continuing Professional Development programme.
- The artists’ approach was informed by their own disciplinary expertise, experience of Magic Me’s training in intergenerational arts practices and a shared commitment to co-labour and crafting of ideas with the participants.

These fixed points of reference contributed to a structure that framed and held the project as it evolved. The variables for each project included:

- Theme. Sometimes these were drawn directly from the collection (*Beauty?* to coincide with the launch of the exhibition *Beauty Queens: Smiles, Swimsuits and Sabotage* whilst others, such as *Heartfelt* were informed by the interests and needs of the group).
- The specific materials from the library. At various points in the project, Sue Mayo worked with the Director, the Education Officer and the Curator of The Women’s Library to discuss a specific theme and the particular materials held by the library that may be interesting points of reflection and departure for the group. After this initial conversation, the Education Officer then spoke with other members of staff about the project so that there was a wider institutional consideration of the project and potential catalyst materials.
- The individual participants: although there were a number of older women who continued to be involved at various times across the decade, there were always new women in the group. The girls were drawn from a specific year group. Many of the exercises in the early part of the project focused on supporting the group – both artists and participants – to find ways of getting to know each other in ways that were not just about ‘reporting’ facts about each other, but details of a person’s life and interests – the things shared as well as the things that distinguished people from each other.
- The specific art forms and artists. Each project developed through a range of different art forms including photography, film, puppetry, sound and sculpture.
- External events that impacted upon the group. The nature of the project, focusing on the lives of women – both participants and those within The Women’s Library collection – meant that the projects were informed by the dialogue between the two. Sometimes there were major local and international events that informed the content and tone of how the group

worked: the London bombings on 7<sup>th</sup> July 2005, one of which happened at Aldgate close to The Women’s Library and Mulberry; the shooting of Malala Yousafzai, a 14-year-old Pakistani girl and education and women’s rights activist who survived an assassination attempt by the Taliban; the London 2012 Olympics and Paralympics; the proposed closure of The Women’s Library. The project offered a space for women of different ages from different cultural backgrounds to discuss these events in ways which were personal, respectful and considered.

Within this context of fixed-points and flux, the team of artists developed specific invitations to the participants to both meet and make: they responded and shaped the materials and events that evolved through this.

This copy of the draft *Spinning Plates* (2005) schedule illustrates the structured spaciousness of the project. There is a very strong sense of what the theme, materials and potential outcome might be with some starting points for exploration and specific tasks within each week. However, this unfolds within each session, depending on the particular group.

### Spinning Plates (2005) Schedule

<b>February</b>	Introductory sessions for young women and older women in separate groups <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Detailed planning and agreements with all partners</li> </ul>
<b>March</b>	Weekly sessions at The Women’s Library <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• group building; exploring project themes</li> <li>• introductory visits to the Library’s resource room</li> </ul>
<b>Easter Holidays</b>	Two-day workshop, including:- <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• one day using the resource room and archives at The Women’s Library</li> <li>• one day learning recording and editing skills at Rich Mix in Bethnal Green</li> </ul>
<b>April / May</b>	Weekly sessions resume <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the group begin to write and edit the text for the soundtrack, including choices of diary extracts from The Women’s Library.</li> <li>• final recording and rough edit</li> </ul>
<b>February</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Break for school exam period</li> <li>• Artists complete editing</li> </ul>
<b>July</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Group meet to evaluate the project</li> <li>• Women’s Library 5th birthday party</li> <li>• Launch of sound piece</li> </ul>



### 3.2 Structured Spaciousness within each session

Each session reflects this framework, with a series of invitations made by the artists to the participants to explore particular questions or ideas. There are particular characteristics that inform the artists' approach within the project: the pace and tone of each session and a conscious awareness of facilitating encounters between pairs, small groups and the entire group.

#### **Pace and Tone**

Each weekly session ran from 4.00pm – 5.30pm. Although the groups were only together for an hour and half and there was a considerable amount of ground to cover, the artists ensured that this time felt spacious and reflective as well as focused and productive. There were always refreshments and time to chat informally before the particular work of the session was introduced. This commitment to spending time together underpinned the development of the relationships between the participants and the artists. Conversations about what had been happening – in the news, in people's lives – both informed and strengthened the relationships between people.

#### **Shapes in the Room**

Each session was planned in such a way that recognised the need to create opportunities for the individual participants to meet and work with each other. Often, because the women arrived before the girls, they were already sitting with each other. When the girls arrived, they would join the women. Early in the project, the girls would tend to sit beside each other, but as they became more familiar with the group, they would then – with little encouragement required – sit in between the older women, joining them.

The sessions would often begin with a group exercise that gave everyone a chance to see each other, to re-establish the group and the particularity of this time together. This feather exercise, which took place at the beginning of a session during *Where the Heart is* (25 April 2012) illustrates both the simplicity and the nuance that the approach offers.

Sue presented the group with a large plate of feathers, all different shapes and colours: a large straight purple one, a wonky small yellow one, a tiny fluffy blue one. The feathers were passed around, each person considered them and then chose a feather that best reflected their mood. They presented the feather to the group explaining why they had chosen it. The women talked about many things: one woman spoke about how school was making her feel down; another of how she was missing her daughter; one woman spoke about having been to the committal of ashes for her sister and how, since then, she had felt better.<sup>26</sup>

This very simple exercise was playful and serious. Each of the women had an opportunity to speak, to choose what they wanted to say, and to be listened to by each other. It was an opportunity for the group to re-form after being away from one another for a week, to reflect on their mood and to choose what they wanted to share with each other. The exercise also allowed the artists to gauge the collective mood, to attend to anyone that might need a bit of extra care and attention within the session, to potentially adapt or develop work in response to this.

Another example which illustrates a conscious consideration of the dynamic in the group, an awareness of the opportunity of The Women's Library as a resource and the particular moment in the arc of a project is evidenced in the Book Spines exercise in the first week of *Where the Heart is*.

Sue and Holly [the volunteer] took the girls up to the Reading Room for the 'Book Spines' exercise. The girls spent ten minutes amongst the books, looking at the array of titles but not opening any of them. They then noted down book titles that they felt could be about them. The group then re-formed back in the café and presented their choices and we discussed why they picked them. (Examples included *Daughter of the Earth*, *Speaking From the Heart*, *Against Nature and God* and *Rebel Queen*).<sup>27</sup>

The following week, the older women took part in a version of this exercise. It was a beginning, and initial focus that had the potential to stimulate both conversation, critical consideration and creative response, to reveal something of the group without them have to divulge anything of themselves.

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<sup>26</sup> *Where the Heart is*, author's notes, 25th April 2012.

<sup>27</sup> *Where the Heart is*, project diary, 22th Feb 2012.

Throughout the session, the artists developed exercises that supported pairs work, smaller group work and whole group work, ensuring that the two groups of participants and particular ways of being within that peer group were helpfully disrupted. The exercises allowed for conversation between the women and the opportunity to make something together. This was then often shared back to the group, performing and reiterating the collaborative relationship between the women.

### 3.3 Structured Spaciousness within exercises

The three exercises that follow are examples of structures that invite participants to generate materials that reflect the particularity of the group: the Post-It exercise; the Praise Poem and the *I am...* poem. It is important to note that each of these exercises doesn't sit in isolation but is within a context that builds upon the previous weeks of work and an understanding of the dynamic within the group at a particular point in the project.

#### 3.31 The Post-It Exercise

This is based on a classic Magic Me exercise that has featured in a number of Women's Library projects.

- The group is divided into intergenerational pairs.
- Each person in the pair identifies three significant dates in their lives that they are prepared to share with the group.
- They then take three Post-It notes and on each one their partner writes their name, the year and a brief description of the significant event.
- All of the Post-Its from the group are then stuck on the wall, arranged chronologically.
- The group examines the collective timeline of significant events and discusses them.

Often what emerges from this first stage in the exercise is the timeframe of the group's lived experience, some very specific events related to age or cultural background and some surprising synchronicities that resonate across the group, regardless of the apparent differences between individuals. Like the Book Spines exercise, this exercise begins to reveal the group to itself. By reviewing and reorganising the materials around, for example, themes or connections it enables the group to relate to each other in ways that have nothing to do with age or a linear sense of time. For example, one girl had noted a pilgrimage she had made to Mecca as an act of memorial for her sister who had died when she was 15 years old. The group then searched in the Post-Its repositioning them to find stories of important and meaningful journeys, and placing them together, before repositioning them according to the theme of bereavement, and then the theme of love of family members. The Post-It exercise enabled the group to, as Sue Mayo

observes, 'visualise connectivity',<sup>28</sup> deepening their understanding both of the individuals in the room and the particularity of the group.

This exercise was also used as a curatorial and editing tool during *Where the Heart is* (2012). During this project, the group had made a number of recordings for podcasts that would be part of the final promenade performance piece. As the production week drew closer, it became clear that there were more stories than could be accommodated within the timeframe of the performance. Decisions needed to be taken about the stories that would be most effective for the audience coming to the material afresh. It was important that the artists, Sue Mayo and Jules Wilkinson, honoured the collaborative creation of the piece and didn't dictate what was included and what wasn't. They asked the group to think about the stories they had heard each other tell that they wanted the audience to hear. These were then listed, one to each Post-It note, and displayed for the group to see. The group then, collectively began to curate and edit the groups of stories that would be most effectively positioned together within each podcast.

This visual representation of the ideas, the physical manoeuvring of them in response to the group's consideration, enabled a dialogue about dramaturgy, about editorial decisions that would inform an aural aesthetic for an audience. The group was collectively authoring a piece. This filtering process emphasised what would be affective for the audience rather than any sense of trying to represent everyone within it. Ultimately, the audience would hear, through the voices of the women, the different ages within the group in addition to the narrative that was crafted by them – age was an additional layer rather than an explicit focus of the piece.

The Post-It exercise allows for number of different possibilities: it introduces people to each other; it can generate creative material; it can support the editing and curation of material in ways that support group authorship.

### **3.32 The Praise Poem**

Another exercise that recurred throughout the decade of projects at The Women's Library was based on the structure of *oriki*, Yoruba praise poems. These poems encourage an expressive and fulsome declaration for someone that is rich in imagery rather than a tentative suggestion. It is much easier for someone, when asked to write about another person in the room, to say, 'I think Jackie is quite a nice person who is very glamorous' than it is to really look at someone, to observe them and to reflect this back to them in a way which is informed by, as the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins called, the inscape of someone – the very it-ness of their being.

During the project, the praise poem was a way of recognising every individual in the group, of having a face-to-face encounter that went beyond the surface of

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28 Sue Mayo, Interview, 28 July 2013.

difference between people to recognising the specificity of the characteristics of that person. It was based on the principle that everyone can be praised and that this acknowledgment of the extraordinariness of each individual would be shared – declared – to the group.

The praise poem also generated performance text that was used in the public performance event for *Beauty?* (2004). In this event, the older and younger women in pairs stood up, looked at each other and spoke their poems to each other. The following poem, written by Habiba and Marga, illustrates both the structure of the poem and the ways in which it demands a particular quality of engagement between people.

*Habiba: Marga, your hair is like white pearls  
Bare blushy and silky.  
Your blue eyes are the colour of sunny blue skies,  
You are as calm as the waves of sunny days.*

*Marga: Habiba, you have gorgeous eyes  
Shining and bright, the windows  
Of your soul  
Reflected in their gaze.  
Your hair streams down in a fast brook.  
Your thoughts are hidden from my view.*

*Habiba: Your blue eyes are the colour of sunny blue skies,  
You are as calm as the waves of sunny days.*

*Marga: Your hair streams down in a fast brook.  
Your thoughts are hidden from my view.*

By including the performance poems within the public event, the women were declaring and modeling the wider aims of the project to an audience – to look beyond the surface of assumption to the particularity of each individual person.

### **3.33 The I am... poem**

Another example of a writing exercise that supports the group in getting to know each other whilst generating creative materials is the *I am...* poem.

Each person is given an envelope inside which there are strips of paper. Each strip has the beginnings of a sentence with, potentially, an instruction about the number of words that can be used in the response for example,

I am... (no more than 1 word)

I believe...(no more than 4 words)

I will always (no more than 5 words)

I want...(no more than 7 words)

I will never (no more than 3 words)

Each person responds to each sentence in any order that they wish.

They can then move the strips of paper around, arranging and rearranging the order of the sentences to create a poem.

There are variables within this – one line could be repeated, other lines could be taken out. Again, it is a structure with opportunity for each individual to respond, shape and craft their thoughts within it.

The poems can also become collaborative writing opportunities.

Individuals pair up.

They each share five 'I am...' sentences.

Together they decide on one, 'I am' each and then one, 'We are...' sentence. This is then performed to the group. For example:

A: I am...  
B: I am...  
A & B: We are...

Again, this exercise can be used early in the process to support the group's understanding of who is in the room. The structure encourages a declaration of interest or something reflective from an individual rather than a statement of fact. Sue Mayo notes how the exercise takes on 'the colour of the project – it absorbs the feeling in the room; it can only be written by those people, in the room together, at that moment in time'.<sup>29</sup>

Much of the text for the performance of *Wild, Wild Women* (2013) was developed through the *I am...* poems including the following poem by Nowshin Sweety, one of the girls from Mulberry School.

*I am a human*  
*I am strong*  
*I will never back down*  
*I am not to be used*  
*I cannot let people control me*

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29 Sue Mayo, Interview, 28th July 2013.

*I am a human  
I am me and I am making my future  
I am unique  
I am equal to a man  
I am a gift to the world and no one owns me  
I am as uncontrollable as the internet  
I am a human*

This principle of structured spaciousness modeled in each project, each session and in many exercises describes one aspect of the arts practice within The Women's Library projects – this was animated and realised through a particular approach that modeled collective enquiry, reflection, playfulness and rigour.

### **3.4 Creative Processes: to invite and to challenge**

In talking about the project, many of the artists, staff and participants were also reflecting on the last ten years of their lives, able to mark moments in their lives and in the world, by a particular project. There was a strong sense from the artists who had been involved in an number of projects that this work acted as a shared anchor or referencing point for their work within Magic Me – it wasn't just a project but a series of relationships with other artists, with the participants and with the organisation.

Sue Mayo, as lead artist and project manager across the decade of work, navigated and negotiated the practical challenges and imaginative possibilities for the work. Each year, she worked with at least one other artist. A number of artists worked on more than one project at the Women's Library including Surya Turner, Anita McKenzie, Polly Beestone and Jules Wilkinson. Surya Turner reflected on the importance of both continuity and ambition offered by Sue:

*Having a certain person there all the time meant that artists could come in and feel part of an ongoing process. She held the whole history of it and she picked up and communicated things: it would be a new project but Sue held a sense of, this is what was going on before, this is where we want to go to. That was hugely valuable. If you were an artist coming in without that, you would miss some of the resonances.<sup>30</sup>*

All of the artists who worked on the project reiterated the value in this steady care whilst also recognising Sue's very particular skills and approach:

Anita McKenzie (photographer): *Sue is a great enabler. She knows her stuff, is very pragmatic and makes it happen. Her awareness is constantly on – about relationships, about everything.<sup>31</sup>*

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<sup>30</sup> Surya Turner, Interview, 9th May 2013.

<sup>31</sup> Anita McKenzie, Interview, 9th May 2013.



offering a challenge to do something extraordinary – together. Sue reflected on a moment in a project that embodied this principle in practice:

*I found a really good metaphor in one of the projects, Dressing Up, when we were looking at what women wear and what we're doing with what we wear – when we're hiding, when we're showing off, when we want to be comfy, when we want to stand out and all of those things. We did a day when we had an amazing collection of costumes and people tried them on. It worked in two ways: one, was that people would go and choose things that they felt really expressed who they were, and the other was that we asked people to work with a partner and let the partner suggest something for them to wear. The deal was that, even if you didn't think it suited you, you tried it out. This is the most perfect metaphor for the way of working in The Women's Library projects: part of the time we're asking people to tell us who they are, inviting them to work in ways which expressed who they were, which gave us stories, information and experiences about who they were. But we are also offering something that's new and saying, try this on, even if you don't think it suits you, try this on. So that rhythm of allowing space for people to express something that is there and at the same time setting up a new thing – opening up a new experience, a new way of working, a new challenge – is equally important. As artists, we developed an approach that was allowing and challenging the participants.<sup>34</sup>*

Gail Cameron, the curator at The Women's Library, recognised the character of the work when she said, 'these weren't projects about giving older people just something to do, it was a challenge and I think that's why people came back.'<sup>35</sup> This approach allows for people to do and say and be in ways that are beyond their habitual behaviours. Anita McKenzie considers the 'safe space' created through the project enabled by the artists:

*When you look at the titles of the projects and what they explore and when people are given the space to engage with something, then all kinds of things can happen. And that's what I like about this intergenerational work – it creates a safe space. There is a very profound spiritual and therapeutic process happening at the same time that allows people to express themselves. I've seen people come at the beginning of the project with issues but by the end being able to engage – and with the young woman. That's profound.<sup>36</sup>*

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34 Sue Mayo, Interview, 4th July 2013.

35 Gail Cameron, Interview, 23rd November 2012.

36 Anita McKenzie, Interview, 9th May 2013.

Jules Wilkinson reiterates this creation of possibilities, of connection, between people when she said:

*That fantastic ability to meet once a week over a long period of time does produce extraordinary things. In the last lot of recordings I did, I don't think I've ever felt so moved by what people were saying and how much it went right to heart of things – their histories, their secrets, what made them tick. That would never have happened unless you'd had that time to get to know each other.<sup>37</sup>*

Sue Mayo refers to this willingness of the participants to share their lives as 'unfolding' and that once one person takes this considered risk, once they allow themselves to unfold, and open up different aspects of themselves, this is a pivotal point in the project: 'It takes one's person's ability to go beyond what's easy to talk about that changes everything. You can't make it happen but when it does it is extraordinary: the stakes are different'.<sup>38</sup> There is a collective sense of listening shared by the artists and the participants: they learn to unfold before each other, to trust in the group to handle this offered vulnerability.

### 3.5 The Audience

All of The Women's Library projects culminated in a sharing of work with an audience, whether it was the calendar published as part of *Spinning Plates* (2005) or the artwork made during *Heartfelt* (2006) that continues to be displayed in the foyer of Mulberry School for Girls. As the projects became more established within each of the partner organisations' work, there was an increasing commitment to a public performance or an event that invited an audience to see and hear the women and what they had to say, in their own very particular way: there was always an awareness of people beyond the group being interested in what they were saying and how they were saying it.

Whilst the overarching structure for each of the projects was similar, the public performance event evolved throughout the months of meeting and making together. The range of outcomes reflects a commitment by the artists to not just present the work of the group but to find a form and structure crafted by aesthetic consideration and high production values. This brief overview of the project performances gives a sense of the range of work produced:

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37 Jules Wilkinson, Interview, 9th May 2013.

38 Sue Mayo, Interview, 28th July 2013.

<b>2004</b>	<i>Beauty?</i>	3 large photographic images of Beauty; performance of spoken word poetry at the private view of the exhibition <i>Beauty Queens: Smiles, Swimsuits and Sabotage</i> at The Women's Library.
<b>2005</b>	<i>Spinning Plates</i>	A calendar of images and texts developed by the group launched at the private view of <i>What Women Want</i> at The Women's Library.
<b>2006</b>	<i>Heartfelt</i>	A series of images of 3-D collages, 9 of which were then made into a wall hanging. This was launched at Mulberry.
<b>2007</b>	<i>Soundtracks</i>	Audio piece, <i>My Voice is the Key to Freedom</i> .
<b>2008</b>	<i>Can I? I Can!</i>	An installation of an archway of two trees decorated with blossoms of the group's desires, disappointment and achievement. This was part of the <i>Between the Covers</i> exhibition in the Library's main space.
<b>2009</b>	<i>Utopia According to Me</i>	Five postcards with a provocation, 'If you want utopia...' There was also a performance in the Reading Room of the Women's Library; a Tea Party to invite the audience to continue conversations about utopia; an installation of postcards received from friends, family and project supporters with their thoughts on utopia.
<b>2010</b>	<i>Dressing Up</i>	A performance in the Reading Room with the audience all in costume; a Tea Party to invite the audience to continue the conversation about clothing and costume.
<b>2011</b>	<i>Moving Lives</i>	An installation event in the seminar room of The Women's Library which was made up of three screens showing images and text developed by the group with a soundscape of the group's stories; a tea party, where the audience brought and discussed a particular object of significance to them.
<b>2012</b>	<i>Where the Heart is</i>	A promenade performance piece made up of six silent films and six podcasts that were installed in various locations around the immediate vicinity of The Women's Library, Aldgate; a hand-drawn map of the walk of love printed on a cotton handkerchief; a Tea Party, where the audience continued to discuss matters of the heart.
<b>2013</b>	<i>Wild Wild Women</i>	A live performance event with text, puppetry and song at the Kobi Nazrul Centre, off Brick Lane; a Tea Party at the beginning of the event, where the audience shared their stories of personal acts that were wild for them.

The relationship between process and product was always at play in the project. Surya Turner and Polly Beestone, in conversation, described the way in which the evolution of the project gave space for the group to grow the material whilst the artists were also mindful that this would be shaped and shared for a public audience:

Surya Turner: *In The Women's Library projects, there was definitely a sense of an end point of a performance but we managed to keep a good balance in terms of the process. I think that's reflective of the importance placed on what goes on in the room, the stories of women and the wider context of the project – and because there is a wider context it means that all of these details matter. And yes, we will do a performance at the end, and there's always a rush at the end, but I never felt that [pressure] in the beginning or middle of the project – the experience was important.*<sup>39</sup>

Polly Beestone: *That's definitely true. I think there is a feeling of being able to let things happen and then putting it together. It is nice to be able to work in that way, to have the trust of the group. That's partly having Sue there and you trust that she has the knowledge of the whole thing but is also willing to take a risk on something new, continuing to push what the possibilities could be for the project as well as retaining the history and the experiences of the group that had happened before.*<sup>40</sup>

The commitment to the evolution of ideas through collaboration was ideological. In practice it also meant that the participants, artists and Magic Me, as the producing organisation, had to be prepared for ideas to continue to come into focus right up on the day of the performance event. There are different demands between managing and producing an event – it is much easier for an artist to 'deliver' that work that they said that they would rather than develop the work that has been crafted through collaboration. To produce work that is committed to collaboration and development demands that an organisation is open to the very particular demands and opportunities of each project.

Within this series of public events, there were particular moments where the idea of the audience became increasingly crucial to the process of the project and the performance event itself: ultimately they were invited to collaborate in the generation of materials and conversations that contributed to the project, to participate in it.

### **3.51 The Tea Party**

Although all of the public events that celebrated each project had a strong social element, the formalised invitation to the audience in the form of a Tea Party became a core element of the projects from *Utopia According to Me*. Sue Mayo reflects on the development of this as a particular aesthetic.

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39 Surya Turner, Interview, 9th May 2013

40 Polly Beestone, Interview, 9th July 2013.



*When artists work with a community group, the audience is often as interested in what is made as they are in the makers – those two aspects are crucial. In this work, some kind of conversation with the makers and a chance to witness the made come together because who the people are who made the work makes it sing more clearly. But we also realised that by the time the group had spent three and a half months on a theme they were incredibly skilled at getting other people to think about it too. So in the tea parties, the group would say to the audience in Utopia According to Me, well, what do you think Utopia is? Or, in Dressing Up, what would you wear? Or, in Moving Lives, what is an object that is special to you?*

*[This idea of meeting the audience] developed hugely so that in Dressing Up all the audience went through the costume room on the way into the performance and dressed up: they saw the show in costume and when they sat down for the tea party, everybody at the tables was in costume. It extended the sense of what product and process are. Somehow bringing them together in the end is something that has really become part of my practice now. I really enjoyed playing with that idea and valuing it as a particular aesthetic.<sup>41</sup>*

The framework and ethos of the project is reflected in the moments at the conversation tables during the tea parties when the audience sits with the women in the project and grapple directly with the issues that have informed the project. Susan Langford illustrated the particular quality of this engagement,

*I was at a table in Wild Wild Women where the group started the interaction with the audience with the exercise, 'never have I ever' and people were confessing things that were wild. In my group there was one of the young women and a male governor from the school. She was saying in front of him and this group of strangers, 'I have told my dad that I'm going somewhere and I've actually gone somewhere else'. I couldn't have said that.<sup>42</sup>*

Surya Turner reflects on why this kind of frank conversation is possible:

*I think it's partly because we have taken off a few layers during the project and that's what's presented in the performance and people are meeting us at that point: we are saying, meet us here, and they do. It shows that gradual uncovering of who we are, how we relate to each other, and to our environment and then sharing it – the essence of that is very strong.<sup>43</sup>*

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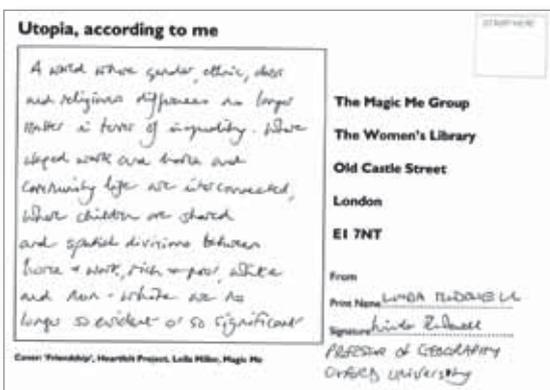
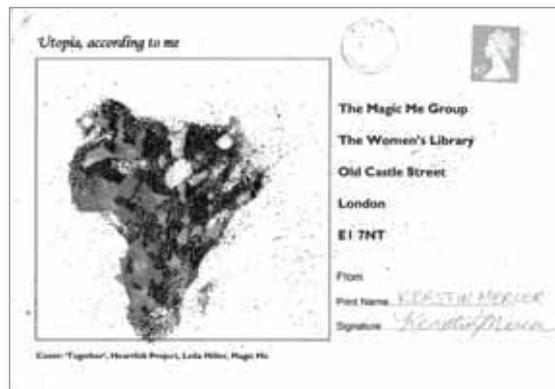
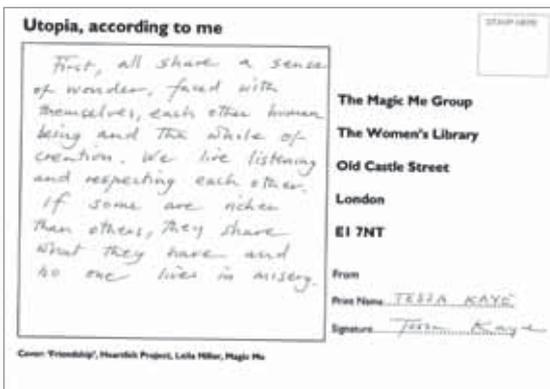
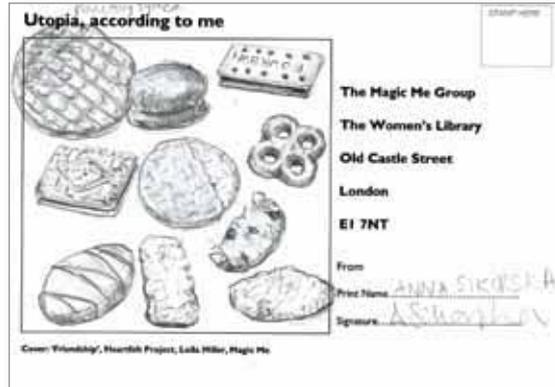
41 Sue Mayo, Interview, 4th July 2013.

42 Susan Langford, Interview, 9th May 2013.

43 Surya Turner, Interview, 9th May 2013.

### 3.52 The Role of the Audience in The Women's Library projects.

The invitation to the audience to participate and collaborate in the project was offered during *Utopia According to Me* when the group sent blank postcards to friends, families and supporters of the project asking them what 'utopia according to me' meant to them. There was a range of responses, both illustrations and text, pithy and contemplative, highly personal and universal as shown in the range of images below:



These postcards were made into an installation in The Women's Library that was part of the performance event. This sense of connection, of an audience beyond that gathered in the reading room at that particular moment in time, reiterated the shared commitment to ideas of social justice and activism that fuelled many of the lives documented with The Women's Library: it recognised the every day acts and lives of men and women in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that were equally as committed to ideas of justice as those (in)famous women in the library's collection. The artists recognised the audiences' willingness and pleasure in being part of the project and this became a core element of thinking about how the audience was invited to participate, from bringing personal objects to *Moving Lives* (2011) through to tweeting the names of women for *Wild, Wild Women* (2013)



In 2012, the idea of the audience for The Women's Library project was greatly expanded when *Where the Heart is* was programmed as part of LIFT 2012, the London International Festival of Theatre. Since 1981, LIFT has been committed to staging innovative theatre and performance events that invited audiences and practitioners to reimagine what theatre can be, where it takes place and who makes it. For over three decades it has commissioned and produced international work across London, in established cultural venues and in site-specific venues as varied as a barge on the river Thames, the front window of a department store and the, then, derelict St Pancras Hotel. It has produced large-scale work in public parks for thousands of people and delicate work for small groups of younger audiences in converted shops. The positioning of Magic Me's work within LIFT was an acknowledgement by LIFT of the

**MIRIAM  
MOSES**

OBE JP

Social Reformer and  
First Woman  
Mayor of Stepney  
1931 - 1932  
was born here  
in  
1886



particularity of The Women's Library project. Erica Campayne, the Participation Producer at LIFT described this as:

*LIFT is very much focused on telling the stories of the world through using London as a stage. This idea really resonated in Where the Heart is because it's about guiding the audience through the streets around Petticoat Lane and Aldgate, engaging with people who are from that bit of town. It's about making sure we tell those stories of London as well. Where the Heart is is different to the rest of the LIFT programme: it has its own rules and its own experience and it's engaging with a much more local audience. It welcomes the Time Out reader, but that's not who it's necessarily aimed at. It's exciting to bring work into the festival that's about who the participants are, what they want to say, and is well executed, beautiful, eloquent and powerful. At the tea party, where you talk with the participants about their work, where you engage with people, you can't put on a role: you have to bring yourself. And so that's really everything we want to be doing with the festival – connecting, connecting people, connecting people to the city.<sup>44</sup>*

It is this sense of connectivity that Campayne articulates that characterises the ways in which the women build relationships across the projects and is the subject of the next chapter in the report.

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44 Erica Campayne, LIFT Participation Producer, 23rd May 2012.

## 4. Working with a women-only intergenerational group

Throughout the decade of projects and partnerships The Women's Library was a place, a collection and a regular space within the week for all of the participants to engage with women's history, feminism and socialist-feminist practices. Within this context, the participants were invited to consider what it means to be a woman in this world now; in the past; if you are a 15-year-old Muslim girl with a strong Bangladeshi social and cultural framework or an 80-year-old Jewish woman who has lived in the East End for her entire life. Working together helped each of the participants know new and different things about themselves, each other, about ways of living in the 21st century multicultural London, and the world beyond their lived experience.

When talking with artists, participants and staff from The Women's Library project, they have all spoken about 'the women in the library' referring to the lives and voices of women who inhabit the books, letters, images and objects within the collection. There is a strong sense that each of the projects has not only been informed but accompanied by women including the feminist philosopher, Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797), the African American abolitionist and women's rights campaigner, Sojourner Truth (1797-1883) and Jocelyn Bell Burnell (1943-), the astrophysicist who discovered the first pulsar in 1967.

### 4. 1 The Personal is Political

*I think during Magic Me Women's Library project I did learn a lot. Before the project I wouldn't have actually considered myself to be a feminist and the project really taught me that being a feminist isn't about hating men: it's just about wanting equality for everyone. Now, I'm not ashamed to say that I'm a feminist. It's a great thing – everyone should be a feminist.<sup>45</sup>*

Throughout the projects, whatever the specific theme was, there was always the opportunity to encounter women in the library who were pioneers for their sex – women who fought with their lives and others who quietly, persistently chipped away at the patriarchal structures that sustained gender inequity and injustice. Throughout the research I have been very struck by how the context of a single sex, intergenerational group, working in and with The Women's Library collection, has fostered extraordinary conversations about social justice and personal responsibility. In both observing sessions and in conversations with all of the participants, there was considerable personal reflection about what it means to be a woman living in East London at this particular moment in time – what it means to be a woman in this world.

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45 Mulberry Student, Interview, 4th July 2013

The theme of the final project was *Wild, Wild Women*. Reflecting on the idea of wildness, one of the young women from Mulberry said, 'Before, I would have just considered it to be being mad, but it's really not. Sometimes wildness is about doing something that isn't considered the social norm but you think it is right so you should do it: I think that's wild.'<sup>46</sup> This recognition of the distinction between societal norms and the 'right' thing to do is a recurring theme in the conversations with the women who participated in the project. Ultimately, the acknowledgement of the gap between the way things are and the way things could be is one of ethical consciousness. Over the decade of work, the women responded to this in a variety of ways. Both the general and the specific were at the heart of the project. As Gita Sarkar, one of the older participants said, 'we have to continue to fight for Women's Rights and we shouldn't give up. We now tend to think that it's done, and it's not.' Issues including prostitution and domestic violence were discussed in ways that were frank but considerate of the range of age, experience and cultural backgrounds in the room.

For Marion Davies, her involvement in The Women's Library project has been a catalyst for direct action. In *Heartfelt*, the group examined materials related to the Women's Suffrage movement. Marion had never voted. However her engagement with the project changed that. She said, 'I never voted in my whole life, but when I saw what happened, what the Suffragettes did for women's rights, I voted. This is a thing that I must do every time there's an opportunity.'<sup>47</sup>

The relationship of the personal with the political, of the private concern as part of a wider campaign, was made explicit when a group of women from The Women's Library project were invited with Susan Langford to Downing Street to celebrate UK Older People's Day (2008). Additionally, in May 2007, Susan Langford was invited to a discussion group with Gordon Brown, just before he became Prime Minister. She consulted with the younger and older women in the *Soundtracks* project before this meeting and their message to him was, 'listen to younger and older people, their ideas and voices are not heard enough and they have a lot to offer the country.'<sup>48</sup>

## 4.2 The Intergenerational Dynamic

Jo Latham, Women's Education Officer at Mulberry, who both observed and participated in projects over two years, neatly distils her observations of the intergenerational character of the group:

*Even though the girls and the women are from different generations and different countries, they can all share the experience of being a woman, the difficulties and celebrations: that's what they bond over.*

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46 Mulberry Student, 4th July 2013.

47 Interview with Marion Davies 4th July 2013.

48 Susan Langford, email correspondence, 14th August 2013.

*It's a rare experience to have that, to feel safe enough to share those things. And it's fun.*

Within this shared experience, there are often particular dynamics. Tracey Weller, Education Officer at The Women's Library, reflected on a particular session for *Where the Heart is*:

*... where the women were talking about what would you fight for, what would you die for. At first, the older women took the lead – they came up with some good examples of things, like the lady who'd championed autistic children's rights in the borough. I think because the older women are quite keen to talk and sometimes the girls are a bit shy because of their age, they're quite inspired by them. I was delighted that the girls did open up after listening to the older women and began to talk about some of their real hopes, for Bangladesh, in particular. I think the older women inspire the younger women to talk. And some of those older women, they're not shy, they've got a lot to say and they want to share it.<sup>49</sup>*

This sense of looking to and respecting the older women as people who are sharing insight, encouragement and perspective rather than being revered for being older is reiterated by one of the Mulberry students who said,

*If I hadn't done the Magic Me project, first of all I would have been stereotyping all old people, which I don't do now. My friends, when they ask me about them, I told them that they're actually quite different and so interesting and the stories that they tell are really motivational and inspiring.<sup>50</sup>*

When asked, 'Do you think you talked about different things because there were only women in the room?', one of the students replied, 'I think so, because if there were men there sometimes you wouldn't have said the things that we discussed there.' Vanessa Ogden, the Head Teacher of Mulberry School reflected on the profound significance of the intergenerational, women-only nature of the work on the young women's sense of themselves in the world:

*They can see their own life as a whole life, because they've had experience of talking to women who are going towards the end of their lives and have all this wealth of experience to share. They can see what a life might be and therefore, in a sense, what their life could be: how their lives might affect others and what sorts of experiences they might have to encounter and deal with in a positive way.*

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49 Tracey Weller, Interview, 19th June 2012.

50 Mulberry Student, Interview, 4th July 2013

Vanessa's insight is true for both the younger and older women in relation to their engagement with the lives of the women they encounter in The Women's Library archive: whether they are 15 or 74, the women they meet within the collection (whether they are the actor, Emma Thompson, the mistress of Victorian household management, Mrs Beeton or the nineteenth century abolitionist and humanitarian, Harriet Tubman) reflect back to them the extraordinary array of possibilities for what a life might be, what their life could be and how their lives might affect others.

### 4.3 Women from Different Cultural Backgrounds

Most of the girls from Mulberry who participated in The Women's Library project are Muslim and from a Bangladeshi cultural context. However, the group of girls is also a group of individuals. They may be a similar age to each other, share some cultural references points or experiences, particularly of being in the same school, but it's important not to assume that they already know each other well. Some girls may have been friends before the project, others may be in shared classes or just have seen each other in the hallway.

Similarly, the older women were a group of individuals. A couple of the women knew each other before the project but most of them got to know each other through it. Within the older women, there is a sweep of age ranges, from 52-91 years of age. Again, the distinctiveness of their experience cannot and should not be absorbed by the general acknowledgement that they are 'older' or of a different generation to the girls. Additionally, the older women had very different cultural backgrounds and experiences.

One of the particular comments that recurred throughout the research was that meeting and working with people who do not share a cultural background opens up opportunities for people to behave in ways that may otherwise be moderated. Shanaz Begum illustrates this when she says,

*We did a project with Sonali Gardens, which is the Bengali older people's home just down the road, working with older men and women. But it wasn't as successful as Magic Me. With Magic Me the participants are so diverse, from different communities and backgrounds: our students felt safer to disclose things to those participants as opposed to the Bengali participants in Sonali Gardens because they were afraid that they will know their dad or their grandmother.*

Marion Davies, one of the older women who participated in 8 of the 10 projects confirms this saying,

*... The young women and the old ladies would meet as strangers. Normally we would never have met like we did, we would never have*

*the opportunity to meet Asian young girls, but through The Women's Library project we learn, which we can't learn anywhere else than being together, about each other's culture and way of life.<sup>51</sup>*

The cultural differences within the group were highlighted after the suicide bombings on London transport in London on 7th July 2005. The bombings, carried out by Islamist terrorists, increased hostility and fear between people. One of the bombs went off near Aldgate, which is very close to Mulberry School and The Women's Library. This happened during the second year of the project, *Spinning Plates*. Susan Langford reflects on how the project offered a place where fear and anger were discussed:

*The bombings made the work of bringing together young Muslim women with other older women even more important; it just highlighted how much we needed to make sure communities had a chance to meet. They met just a few days after the bomb had gone off just down the road and that was very powerful for those people who were there and it just underlined it all for the rest of us. It was great that Sue was there because she's got the experience to handle conversations like that. The next project was Heartfelt, because she felt that we really needed to give people the chance, within a safe structure, to discuss some of those things that were being touched upon on after the bombings. People always say, 'oh, it's so nice that it's a diverse group'. But actually, what that really means is that difficult stuff has to be handled quite carefully.<sup>52</sup>*

This particular moment highlights one of the most significant elements of the project: the materials from The Women's Library collection were the focus for the project – the nucleus around which the women met – and the conduit for conversations about their lives. Without this initial deflection of attention away from the participants it would be easy for intergenerational work with women from diverse cultural backgrounds to become *about* those characteristics rather than a framework through which to discuss a multitude of things *informed* by this.

#### 4.4 Personal Development

All of the women who participated experienced a shift in their understanding of themselves in the world. Many of them expressed a strong sense of being part of a collective of women – not just a collective of girls and older women and artists working on a project, but a wider movement of women that included the historical and contemporary figures they directly encountered in the archive and the many others that they knew inhabited the materials of The Women's Library. The cumulative effect of the sheer physical space, the

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51 Marion Davies, Interview, 4th July 2013

52 Susan Langford, Interview, May 2012.

thousands of books and journals that lined the walls of the reading room and the programme of exhibitions contributed to a growing awareness of an entire organisation invested in the importance of not only the fragments of these lives but developing the collection to include others. All of these structural, material and organisational concerns were, even if very subliminally, absorbed by the participants and contributed to a recognition of the social, political and cultural value given to women.

Mulberry School for Girls actively encourages its students to be individuals who are mindful of a wider collective responsibility. The school recognises and values the potential of The Women's Library project for the girls' personal development and gave great consideration to who was selected for the project and how they would both benefit and contribute to it. Vanessa Ogden considered the opportunity that the project offered for each girl:

*Sometimes extended learning or enrichment can be used to describe additional opportunities, clubs and things like that. However, The Women's Library project is absolutely critical to the development of those young women who are involved. So, in a way, although it takes place outside of the formal curriculum I see it as part of their core education.*

When I met with the students a month after *Wild Wild Women* finished, they reflected on their learning and development. I asked them, 'If you hadn't been part of the Magic Me Women's Library Project what would be missing in your life?' This following is a snapshot of some of their responses:

*I'd be very stereotypical about women and I probably wouldn't be a feminist right now.*

*I wouldn't have a different view of older women – I'd be thinking, oh they're like our grandmothers, set in their own way, always nagging us to do something and thinking bad of us.*

*I probably wouldn't respect myself – it made me respect myself a lot more, I'm a woman, I'm a girl, but I can achieve a lot more: I can achieve whatever I want.*

*You value yourself. It makes you realise how important you are.*

*I think knowledge would be missing, because before the project happened, I didn't know anyone like Rosa Parks.*

*Through the project you discover so many people that have done so much.*

*You don't just forget the thing that you've learned, even though it wasn't like school. The other day I was in the library in the non-fiction section and there was a book about Jasvinder Sanghera, I now know this person, she fought for women who were being forced into marriage.*

*The journey was the most fun for us. If you read a story, the beginning is okay and then in the end, something bad or good happens. But the middle is the interesting part. It's the best bit.*

This range of comments gives insight into the richness of the process: of the girls' reflections on their own sense of self and how this has shifted in response to their relationships with the older women who participated in the project with them, with the women in the world beyond the project, and how the arts based process supported this development. Vanessa Ogden distilled this sense of potential when she said,

*When you're involved in arts work it's very much about you and how you develop as a person, who you want to be in the world and how a project helps you to become that person in the way that you want to be. As a school, we are not there to mould a particular shape of person. We support young women to become themselves and to become more than they imagined they could be. That's very much about them and their choices, knowing that they can exercise that power of choice about their lives in the world.*



This sense of self-awareness developed through the projects is equally true for the older women. One of the most important aspects of this project was that the invitation to think about who you are, who you *want* to be, is equally applicable to the older women. The project models a principle that says, whether you are 15, 45 or 75 years old, your life is not a done deal, something that's fixed: there's always the possibility to meet new people, to do new things, to understand things differently, to think differently. It's an extraordinary thing for all of the women to talk about their lives, but even more so for them to all shared that sense of 'ah, what if...?' together.

For some of the older women who have participated in a number of projects across the last ten years of their lives, there was also evidence of the 'what if...?' being realised, being lived out in the moment.

*When I was living the other side of the water I did things like creative craft and pottery but when I moved over this side it was like everything died in me [...] I picked a leaflet up, and phoned Linkage. I said, I'm lifeless, I need a bit of help getting to know the area. I started off with the coffee morning in Sonali Gardens and then I said, I need something constructive and she referred me to here. And ever since I've looked forward, I haven't looked back – it's different every year, we're always creating something different. And the youngsters coming together with the adults and working together. When you're here, you don't have to act your age – you can act silly if you want. It's kept up here going. [She taps her head]. One of the things its helped me with is writing and spellings – writing, putting pen to paper, its one of the biggest things to me.<sup>53</sup>*

*I missed the project last year because I was ill and I really did miss it. I look at this project as part of my creativity. I'm going on, regardless of age, learning – and that's what life's all about. I'd like to develop another side of myself, my writing – I'd like to have done a bit more of that – and this does give me a chance to explore these other avenues.<sup>54</sup>*

The women's commitment to the project and their desire to be challenged through it was reflected by Gail Cameron, the curator of The Women's Library,

*When I consider this project, I particularly think of the core of local elders who have participated in project after project and who have really surprised me in the ways that they seem to have changed over that period of time. I suppose it's about understanding and understanding themselves. Being introduced to all of this material through the arts is not quite as daunting as having to traipse around a very serious exhibition – you are able to come very close to the*

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53 Roberta Stewart, Interview, 9th May 2012

54 Joanna Judge, Interview, 9th May 2012

*exhibition and to the objects in the collections we have. I think it allowed people to question all sorts of things in their lives.*

This quality to questioning, of reflection, of personal development and growing confidence was apparent throughout the project for all of the women, whatever their age. There were many considerations which supported this, particularly the attention to detail – from the material in the collection, a specific exercise developed to support response to this and a keen awareness of the dynamic within the room and the part each woman played within this. This care was reiterated and enhanced by the small size of the group. Jill Tuffee, Deputy Head at Mulberry School, articulates the importance of the intimacy of the group,

*With The Women's Library project, if you're not there it really matters, each girl's contribution matters. A lot of the students hadn't realised that. Because if a student doesn't turn up it's not that they don't care or they don't want to take part: it's that they feel a bit invisible themselves and so, if they're not there they think, who's going to notice or what does it matter? But, if you're regularly saying, 'your part is really important and it really matters and they missed you', it helps them understand: it's part of the emotional development that happens around the project.*

Jill's comments are equally as applicable to the older women – their participation matters, they are missed if they are not there, they are needed to make this particular group. Ultimately, the group of participants within each of The Women's Library projects was small enough to build relationships within it but big enough to reveal a range of voices and experience within it.

## 5. Working with Cultural Collections

This chapter considers the specific learning developed, in particular, by the artists and partner organisations about working with The Women's Library specifically and how some of this may be applied to cultural collections more generally.

### 5.1 The place of The Women's Library in the lives of the participants.

*I think it was really good going to The Women's Library to do the project because it was great to see that there was a place that was solely dedicated to the works and the history of women. Even though in your normal library you'll find books about women, there's hardly ever a whole section that's just dedicated to women. However in The Women's Library everything was about women, the stuff that they'd done. It was quite inspirational.<sup>55</sup>*

Many of the participants, artists and partners have commented on the importance of The Women's Library as a place that was home for the project. It wasn't a school or a resource centre or day centre for older people. but rather a social, cultural and educational space that was home to the project rather than one of the groups. Tracey Weller, Education Officer for The Women's Library commented,

*When the women and girls come here they're not being treated in the institutional way. It's not as though you're going into a nursing home or a residential home and then you're just slotting yourself into the rhythm of that. People come out and it's a different rhythm: I think that's appreciated.*

The space and environment created by the artists within each weekly session spilled beyond the confines of the room they were working in, across the building and to the staff from reception by the front door through the librarians in the reading room. This idea of feeling at home and at ease in the building was illustrated very simply but effectively by Marion Davies when she told me that if she was out and about and it was raining, she knew she could wait for a taxi in the foyer of the library and have a chat with the receptionist.

Gail Cameron, the curator of The Women's Library, told me of a particular example of Rachel Ogunleye, one of the older women from Nigeria, who was supporting libraries there by encouraging people to send them books. It was The Women's Library policy that if it had duplicates of printed material within its collection it was removed. A conversation between Rachel and the library staff ensured that a number of the library's duplicates were sent directly to the libraries in Nigeria. This reveals how the dialogue and relationship between the

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55 Mulberry Student, Interview, 4th July 2013

women and the library extended beyond the session or project, connecting the specificity of women in East London with women internationally.

## 5.2 The Women's Library collection as a catalyst for intergenerational arts practice.

Sue Mayo has extensive experience of developing intergenerational arts work in community and heritage contexts. The duration of The Women's Library project was highly unusual and made possible because of the rich potential of the materials within the library:

*I think in the first project – which was about beauty, it was about image – we realised really quickly that actually finding a piece of territory, a piece of common ground, for women of different ages was extraordinarily rich. From the beginning of the project the young women and the older women talked about things I hadn't heard people talk about in intergenerational work before. I then realised that it was very rich and really enjoyable but also very important – this made me want to continue the project.*

*[After the first project] I had a meeting with the Director of The Women's Library, Antonia Byatt, and we talked about the resources of the Library and what might be good themes which young and older women could share in equally. There was a huge list and so many inciting objects and pieces of text in the Library. I then had an ambition to carry the project on longer term so that we could look at different areas and different themes, but also so that we could really develop what began to feel like a special way of working.<sup>56</sup>*

The surprise and pleasure of the haptic quality of working with the archive material is reiterated throughout the project by the women who participated. One of older women, reflecting on her experience of holding Emily Wilding Davison's purse was still, clearly, delighted and invigorated by this, 'we got to hold the purse. What a feeling! I'll never forget it. That feeling is something so precious – it gets you there [she clasps her chest], a gut feeling of how that person was, or is, because it feels like she is there'.<sup>57</sup>

Having access to a museum, library or archive is the first part of a process of negotiation and choice. Once inside, the sheer volume of materials – printed material, objects and photos – can be overwhelming. In order to guide and support access to The Women's Library collection, Sue Mayo worked closely with key staff – particularly the Education Officer and the Curator – to select particular materials for the project. Tracey Weller, the Education Officer, explained this process and how it involved staff across the library.

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<sup>56</sup> Sue Mayo, Interview, 4th July 2013.

<sup>57</sup> Marion Davies, Interview, 23rd May 2012.



Above: Suffragette rosette from the collection at The Woman's Library@LSE

*Sue gives me the concept and then I try and link it to someone. I think it's better to link to a person than just lots of objects, because the women and girls get inspired by people. If I just had lots of really interesting artifacts out and the people behind them perhaps are a bit dry, I'm not sure how the Magic Me women would respond. They like a good story.*

*Planning for 2012, Sue said to me, we're thinking of where the heart is, we're thinking about love and about Whitechapel. At the time I was reading a really good biography about the Pankhurst family. Sylvia did a lot in Whitechapel for the working women here which other people in the suffrage movement weren't interested in doing. She had lots of complex relationships, and a difficult relationship with her mum and her sister. This idea of thinking, what is love, and thinking about it in relation to her and her family was potentially very interesting.*

*When we discussed the final project, Wild, Wild Women, I was thinking, who's wild? All the suffragettes were a bit wild, but do we want to go down the suffrage route again because we've done quite a lot of that. I talked to the collection staff about the themes because they just know so much more about who's in there. And then a member of staff said, 'don't forget Vera 'Jack' Holme': she was the cross-dressing chauffeur of Emmeline Pankhurst. She is more than a suffrage story, during the First World War she went out to be a nurse in Serbia, was captured by the Austrians and got into all kinds of scrapes. She pushed the boundaries*

*because of her war-time activities and her cross-dressing added another dimension to that.*

I witnessed this sense of the group, literally, being drawn into the collection through ‘a good story’ during *Where the Heart is*. Tracey brought a range of materials from the collection related to Sylvia Pankhurst including photographs of the Pankhurst sisters and their mother and a brooch designed by Sylvia that was given to suffragettes upon leaving Holloway Prison. As Tracey began to tell us something of the life of Sylvia, she was animating the materials and the group was leaning together to examine them. I was struck by the fact that most of us in the room knew something of the suffragettes in varying degrees of detail, but Tracey’s story of Sylvia Pankhurst, the women with complex relationships *as well* as being a key figure in the suffragette movement, allowed us to have a new and shared understanding of her. In this moment, we were all equal in our shared sense of wondering and questioning.

### 5.3 Organisational learning

*When we have done other one-off arts based projects you accumulate knowledge from each of them, but there is something about working with the same people repeatedly that allows all the parties to learn what has happened previously and to build on each successive project with a common knowledge.*<sup>58</sup>

Gail Cameron was the Curator at The Women’s Library throughout its life in Aldgate (2004-2013) and she witnessed not only the development and fortunes of the building and its collection but the decade of work with Magic Me and Mulberry School for Girls. As noted earlier, one of the characteristics that both defined and facilitated the duration of The Women’s Library projects was the number of key staff at each of the partner organisations who continued to be involved in the work across various projects. As Gail’s comment identifies, these people embodied institutional knowledge, reflecting on and adapting particular ways of working in response to each successive project.

There are some approaches of working with archive and museum materials that have been articulated specifically about The Women’s Library project that may be usefully applied to other contexts. Tracey Weller, the Education Officer, proposes,

*Be prepared but let the group shape the session. What always strikes me, is just how surprising the women and the girls can be in terms of the stories that they tell. Don’t think of people in terms of their age or their gender or their race. It’s just a group of people who are coming – wait for them, you can bring particular things out of the archive, but don’t expect something specific... let them dictate it. When I’m working*

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58 Gail Cameron, Interview, 23rd November 2012.

*with school and ESOL groups I have lesson plans. When I do Magic Me I never have a lesson plan, I have a list of things that I'm going to show them and some questions that I might ask and just see where they take you. The best things come from that group when they just chat and share with you.*

*The other thing is just to make sure that everyone gets a chance to engage and to speak [...] some of the women are very eager to talk straightaway and some really want to say something but hold back quite a lot. You have really to keep an eye on that and make sure that people are invited and involved.<sup>59</sup>*

Gail Cameron reflected on the how The Women's Library projects helped her, personally, and the library look at the collection in a different way,

*I enjoy that process of people looking at the collections in ways that we as curators and heritage professionals don't. The Emily Wilding Davison film that was created in Moving Lives was incredibly poignant: it used very personal objects from an archive for the participants to start to think about material culture and issues around material culture and then to tell their own stories through their own objects.*

*It's opened us up to different ways of thinking about how you use the material, to reconsider the archive and what the archive means and that it's much more expressive than perhaps we thought previously. And about the importance of feeling comfortable about interrogating it through personal experience rather than through some big body of knowledge.*

*Through witnessing that process, I came to really understand what people mean by the process being really important. I was surprised by how rigorous it was. I've also learned about how hard it is and how long it takes for the people who wouldn't necessarily think that an institution like this is for them to understand that it is here for them: watching that kind of transformation is great and acknowledging that it is a long term thing is important. It's so lovely seeing those women in the building and them thinking it's theirs – I don't think that happens very often. The Magic Me Women's Library project is more than the collection, it's more than each partner in the collaboration or the older women and the girls – everybody in this building knows the Magic Me people.<sup>60</sup>*

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59 Tracey Weller, Interview, 23rd June 2012.

60 Gail Cameron, Interview, 23rd November 2012.

## 6. Wild Wild Women – Findings

- The group reveals itself through its engagement with the cultural collection materials.
- The materials reveal their potency through the participants' engagement with them.
- Both these things are possible when a group is facilitated through an arts approach that offers structured spaciousness, modeling collective enquiry, reflection, playfulness and rigour.

The characteristics of The Women's Library project are the things that define it and things that enabled it to evolve into a decade of work. The factors that supported the project were:

- Magic Me works with a core group of artists trained in intergenerational arts practice that it continues to support through its CPD programme. Through this, the artists understand Magic Me's principles of practice and the organisation understands the complex contexts the artists are working in. The organisation invited the artists to come to it with ideas for potential projects.
- The starting point for the project was Sue Mayo's recognition of the opportunity of the newly opened Women's Library in Aldgate – it was literally, a concrete idea, rather than an abstract one. What might this building and its collection offer to an intergenerational group of women who are connected to this location?
- The identification and negotiation of partners was considered. Each partner has a specific area of expertise and the project offered a number of explicit benefits to each organisation that supported their individual missions: Mulberry School for Girls was the closest girls' school to The Women's Library and it had a commitment to performing arts and to supporting the young women in their engagement with the world; The Women's Library wanted to make itself known to its local community but didn't yet have the organisational capacity or specific knowledge of intergenerational practice to initiate a project of this complexity; Magic Me was keen to develop new approaches to intergenerational arts practice that were informed by a cultural collections context.
- Recognising the place of the project in the life of each partner organisation – and that this can change. The Women's Library project was a core element of Magic Me's programme of work – Susan Langford and Sue Mayo were committed to the development of the project and led on all aspects of it from fundraising to recruitment, from the identification of theme through to envisioning and realising the final event. Although the project worked with a small number of girls each year (between 5-10), The Women's Library project was a significant part of the life of Mulberry School for Girls. Within The Women's Library itself, the project was prioritised in particular years

depending on staff capacity and leadership, at times being a project that happened under the wing of 'education' and at other times something that infused and was supported by the entire infrastructure.

- Recognising the context of the participants' lives in the planning of the project – from the time of year to the time of day, from the duration of a project to the rhythm of meeting and making within it. The Women's Library project generally ran for 3 months in the spring, after school one day a week with an intensive day or weekend during the Easter holidays and culminated in a public event.
- The context of The Women's Library as a building and venue for the project that did not belong to either the girls or the women – it was home to the project. It was not neutral but charged with the very particular possibilities of this group.
- Recognising early in the first project that the context of The Women's Library and the encounters with the materials within it allowed for a different kind of meeting and making between the women. All participants and partners recognised that this was something worth exploring further.
- The size of the group was small – usually between 12-15 women. The group was big enough to reveal a diversity of experience but small enough for individuals to build relationships within it.
- Structured spaciousness informed the approach for each project, session and most exercises. It is a principle which offers a framework for exploration, for risk, for reflection, for surprises.
- Everyone's expertise is recognised and valued: the artists, the curator, the participants. Together they developed new understandings of themselves, each other, historical and contemporary experiences of women and the possibilities of The Women's Library collection.
- All relationships require attention: between partner organisations; between artists and participants; between participants.
- Only a small number of objects or materials from the collection are needed to provoke considerable response and understanding about the objects themselves, the lives the people they relate to and the wider socio-cultural context that shaped them.
- It is helpful for the collection materials to be given some introduction by the collection experts but the group's own particular interests will inform their questioning and understanding of them and their significance.



- Seeing and holding objects from the collection is meaningful. The haptic encounters generate a 'felt' understanding about the object, the life of the person it connects with and the relationship between the here and now and there and then.
- The idea of audience: for The Women's Library the project was part of its audience development programme, bringing people into the library who may not usually use it. The relationship between the library and Mulberry School for Girls was also strengthened through this. Over time, the tea party at the final event meant that The Women's Library was not just a venue for an event but a space for people to meet, to critically engage and develop new understandings.
- The annual nature of the project was not just about repeating a project but building on the understandings of what is successful from one year to the next.
- The materials from The Women's Library collection were the focus for the project – the nucleus around which the women met – and the conduit for conversations about their lives. Without this initial deflection of attention away from the participants it would be easy for intergenerational work with women from diverse cultural backgrounds to become *about* those characteristics rather than a framework through which to discuss a multitude of things *informed* by this.

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## The Project Funders

Most annual project budgets ranged from £7,000-13,000 depending on the artforms and final products made. For instance printing calendars was expensive, but the cost offset by sales of calendars. *Where the Heart is* in 2012 was the most expensive project, just over £20,000, covering production costs of seven locations over two days, as part of LIFT. All of these budgets include management time and overheads.

Mulberry School contributed substantially to all of the project budgets except the first, which was fully funded by two grants. Where there was a shortfall in budget, Magic Me drew on unrestricted grants and donations, to make the project happen.

### ***Beauty 2004***

National Lottery, through Awards for All  
Lucas Tooth Trust

### ***Spinning Plates 2005***

St Katharine & Shadwell Trust  
Lucas Tooth Trust

### ***Heartfelt 2006***

St Katharine & Shadwell Trust  
National Lottery, through Awards for All

### ***Soundtracks 2007***

St Katharine & Shadwell Trust  
Arts Colleges  
Tower Hamlets Partnership

### ***Can I? I Can! 2008***

Tower Hamlets Partnership  
National Lottery through Awards for All

### ***Utopia, According to me 2009***

St Katharine & Shadwell Trust

### ***Dressing Up 2010***

St Katharine & Shadwell Trust

### ***Moving Lives 2011***

Mulberry School for Girls

### ***Where the Heart is 2012***

National Lottery through Arts Council  
England

### ***Wild Wild Women 2013***

National Lottery through Arts Council  
England

## About the authors

### Sue Mayo

A theatre maker and community artist, Sue is Associate Artist for Magic Me. Sue has worked as lead artist on all ten of the projects at The Women's Library, as well as on many other Magic Me projects. She also works freelance, including most recently with Project Phakama, on 'The Edible Garden', and with students at Queen Mary, University of London on their award-winning 'Living Maps', for the cultural Olympiad. Sue has worked extensively with LIFT to develop creative responses to the archive of its first twenty years, and was an artist on LIFT's Eat London in 2007.

Sue is Convenor the MA in Applied Theatre at Goldsmith's, teaching an international group of students interested in investigating and developing participatory and socially engaged theatre practice.

Sue is co-author, with Susan Langford, of *Sharing the Experience*, a handbook of intergenerational arts practice, available from Magic Me. *Detail and Daring*, Sue's report on Magic Me's performance collaboration with *Duckie*, with a focus on how different art forms facilitate relationship building, is also downloadable from Magic Me. Sue has written about Magic Me's work, and about the artist Mark Storor, in *Performance & Community: Case Studies and Commentary*, edited by Caoimhe McAvinchey. (Methuen 2013)

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### Dr Caoimhe McAvinchey

Dr Caoimhe McAvinchey is a Senior Lecturer in Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies at Queen Mary, University of London. Her research is in applied and social theatre particularly intergenerational arts practices, prison theatre and the politics and practices of documentation and evaluation. Publications include *Theatre & Prison* (Palgrave, 2011) and the edited collection *Performance and Community: Commentary and Case Studies* (Methuen, 2013). Caoimhe has carried out research with Magic Me since 2007, evaluating *Our Generations* (2009) and examining the role of the artist in intergenerational arts practice ('Coming of Age: Arts practice with older people in private and domestic spaces' in *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance* Vol 18, No. 4).

London Borough of Tower Hamlets  
**Afsana Begum**  
 Born Sylhet, Bangladesh, 1997  
 Leading Dancer, Style Icon, Explorer and international star.  
 Voted by the People.

London Borough of Tower Hamlets  
**Alma Ramnauth**  
 Born St Mary's Village, South Oropouche, Trinidad, 1946  
 Actress, Singer, Dancer Nurse Tutor & Aunt to many, Godmother Extraordinaire  
 Voted by the People.

London Borough of Tower Hamlets  
**Anita Farhat**  
 Born in the Royal London Hospital, 1997  
 Actress, Scientist, Dancer and Queen of Laughter.  
 Voted by the People.

London Borough of Tower Hamlets  
**Atiyah Rahman**  
 Born in the Royal London Hospital, 1997  
 Grade B in English & Grade A in helpfulness  
 Voted by the People.

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**Gita Sarkar**  
 Born in Hyderabad, India, 1937  
 Storyteller supreme- any story, any topic, any time.  
 Voted by the People.

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**Joanna Romaine Judge**  
 Born Hoxton, North London, 1932  
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**Marion Davies**  
 Born in the Mother Levy Hospital, London E1, 1932  
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**Nusrat Nadia**  
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**Rachel Ogunleye**  
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**Rifat Hoque**  
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 Shopping Consultant East London's Queen of Sheba  
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**Roberta Stewart**  
 Born in Aberdeen, 1946  
 Lover of creative crafts. Joyful dancer, always a friend in need and a helping hand.  
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London Borough of Tower Hamlets  
**Sumayya Begum**  
 Born in the Royal London Hospital, 1998  
 Food Critic & Debating Champion, who always finishes what she starts.  
 Voted by the People.

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**Winnie Roach**  
 Born in Georgetown, Guyana, 1948  
 Mother to all and a dazzling radio star.  
 Voted by the People.



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