



Conversations and Actions Whitechapel Gallery

Gert & Uwe Tobias, Karl Blossfeldt, Children's Art
Commission: Simon & Tom Bloor, Giuseppe Penone
April–June 2013

whitechapelgallery.org

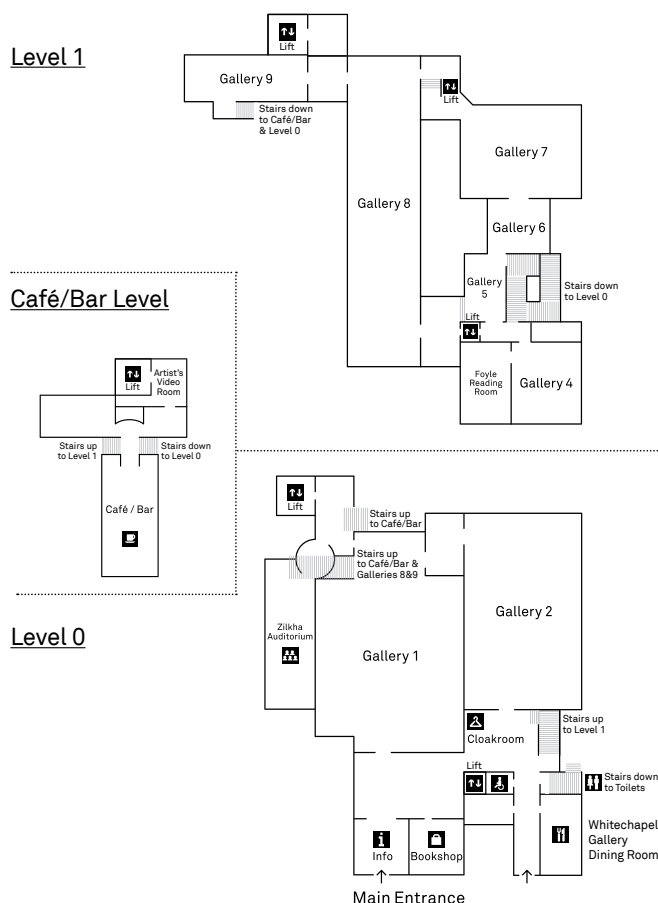
Introduction: Conversations & Actions

Conversations & Actions has been put together by the Whitechapel Gallery's Education Department to introduce primary and secondary school teachers and group leaders in general to each season of exhibitions and new commissions at the Gallery. It explores key themes within the exhibitions on display by suggesting questions to spark conversation, warm-up activities and discussions around works in focus, proposing actions that can be realised in the Gallery or in the classroom.

Illustrations and artists' quotes are included throughout as well as links to further information about the artists and works. In addition to this resource, we recommend referencing the 'further information' sections throughout and identifying any cross-curricular connections with other subject areas before your visit. We also recommend calling the Education Department in advance to discuss your visit, the use of our studio spaces (which can be booked free of charge) as well as other events at the Gallery listed at the end of this resource.

We hope you enjoy your visit.

Whitechapel Gallery Map



Spring 2013 at the Whitechapel Gallery

Spring 2013 sees the arrival of a wide variety of exciting new exhibitions and commissions at the Whitechapel Gallery. In Gallery 1, **Gert & Uwe Tobias** present collaborative woodcuts, sculptures, collages and drawings; and Galleries 8 and 9 house a major presentation of self taught photographer **Karl Blossfeldt's** botanical images.

Giuseppe Penone: Spazio di Luce (Space of Light) continues in Gallery 2.

Black Eyes and Lemonade: Curating Popular Art in Gallery 4 revisits an exhibition of British Popular Art held at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1951 including original exhibits and archival material. The third in a year-long series of displays of works from **Collection Sandretto Re Rebaudengo: A Love Meal** focuses on sculpture in the collection, looking at different approaches to portraiture and the construction of social and cultural identity.

Finally, the Children's Art Commission, **Simon & Tom Bloor: Loose Parts** takes place in Galleries 5 and 6. The artists present a new body of work resulting from a year-long residency at Hermitage Primary School in Tower Hamlets.



Gert & Uwe Tobias
16 April–14 June 2013



Karl Blossfeldt
16 April–14 June 2013



Childrens Art Commission:
Simon & Tom Bloor: Loose Parts
19 March–9 June 2013



Collection Sandretto Re Rebaudengo:
A Love Meal
19 March 2013–9 June 2013



The Bloomberg Comission:
Giuseppe Penone
4 September 2012–September 2013

Gert and Uwe Tobias

Gallery 1

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Born in Romania in 1973, twin brothers **Gert and Uwe Tobias** live and work in Cologne, Germany. Collaboratively they make woodcuts, collages, sculptures and typewriter drawings. The works of art in this exhibition bring together these diverse media.

Visually they combine the lines, shapes and block colours of geometric Abstraction with narratives reminiscent of Surrealism and patterns drawn from ornamentation and folk art.

The woodcuts and wall-designs display a strong interest in the graphics of the early 20th century alongside an exploration of folkloric ornamentation and floral patterns as precursors of abstraction. Such Modernist references are juxtaposed with fragmented shapes and characters, spilling from woodcut and canvas into ceramics and the exhibition space, allowing viewers to immerse themselves in subversive, carnivalesque narratives.

Employing different media and artistic traditions, Gert and Uwe Tobias dissolve boundaries between craft and fine art, abstract concept and unconscious fantasy, and modernity and tradition.

Their diverse use of media is tied together with a site-specific wall-design so that:

“When viewers come into the Gallery, they should feel as if they are plunging into the world of the Tobias brothers. Through the choice of works, their placement and the painting of the walls, we try to facilitate this ‘plunging in’ while at the same time also offering fresh perspectives on the individual works.”

Gert and Uwe Tobias, interview with Eisler Curator, Daniel F. Herrmann, 2013



The Tobias brothers use a variety of media to develop their work, engaging in an on going dialogue taking it in turns to add, move, or replace material.

They bring together disparate themes to disrupt and clash conventional associations between ideas and images, a process and methodology that can be identified throughout the works exhibited. For example in their ceramic work you find pieces of mass produced ceramics combined with unusual and vulgar forms.



Talk about how Gert and Uwe Tobias work together, both in initiating ideas and then making work. Take time to look at the work on display while thinking about the processes that the brothers use.

What might these works tell you about Gert and Uwe's collaborative process?

How do the additional forms on the ceramics change or disrupt your perception of the original object?



Action – beyond the Gallery

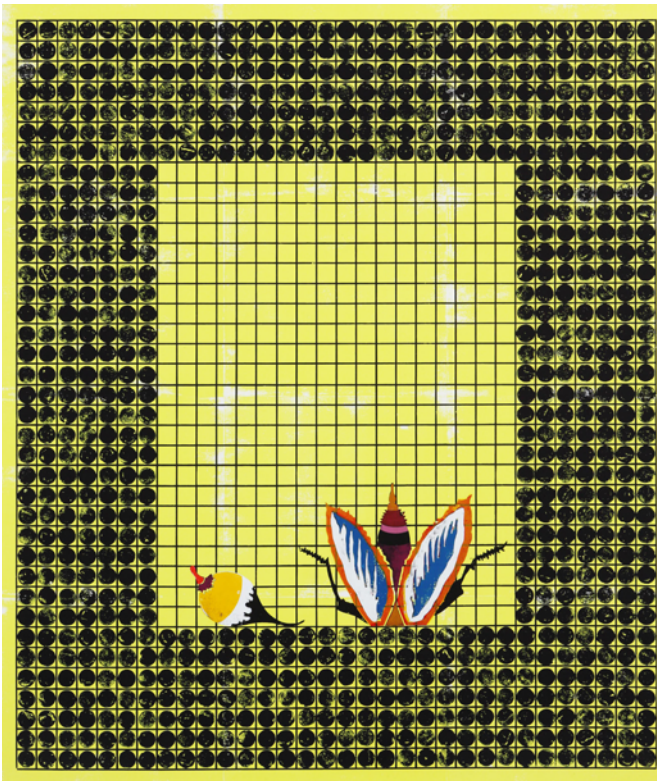
Work together in pairs to create a collage, taking it in turns to add, move and remove elements until you are both satisfied with the image.

Think about where you will find the material for your collage using a mixture of recognisable and abstract forms.

Try working on a collage in larger groups in the classroom, moving round to each table systematically to work on the next collage. Bring the final pieces together and as a class discuss how they are composed. How did you find the process of working in this way?

Folkloric iconography from European cultures can be found throughout the Tobias's work – you will notice decoration, repetition and ornamentation of various forms.

Both real and imagined animals regularly appear, most commonly flying creatures often montaged to create new fantastical hybrids. You will also notice that eyes frequently appear. The resulting images are often quite disturbing, juxtaposing and interrupting the formalised backgrounds.



What repeating images can you find throughout the works?

How does the repetition of images affect your experience of the exhibition?

What do the animals and plants symbolise? Where do you think they come from?

Action – beyond the gallery

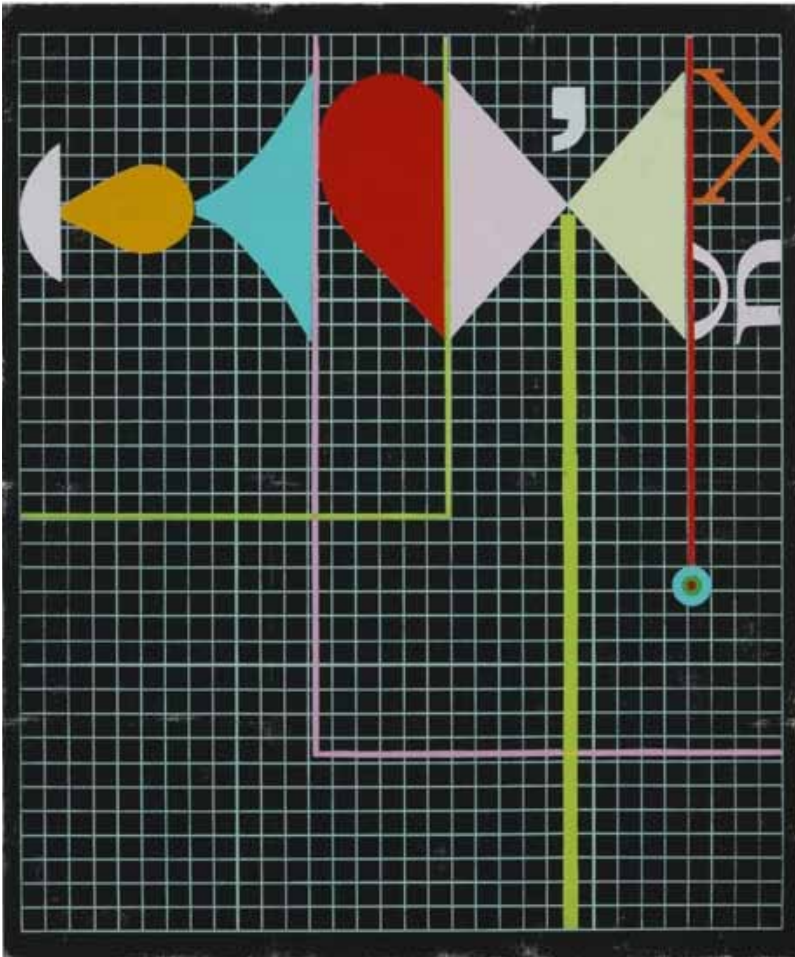
Investigate different folk and fairy tales from European culture, for example the Brothers Grimm or Hans Christian Andersen.

Experiment with different paper cutting techniques to create your own creature or plant life.

Gert and Uwe Tobias' woodcuts and wall-designs display a strong interest in the graphics of the early 20th century, including the experimental typography of Jan Tschichold and the exhibition designs of El Lissitzky. Their woodcuts are handmade and each is unique.

Grids are used as a graphic tool or as an organising system. Geometric forms are layered and lines are used to frame and divide. The Tobias's have created a site-specific wall design which ties the different elements of the exhibition together.

At the back of the exhibition you will see a triptych of images where the serrated edges of the wall design apply an aggressive edge that juxtaposes with the content of the works.



How do you feel when you look at abstract work? What can you see?

Do you think these shapes and forms have a basis in real-life objects?
What could they be?

Look at Karl Blossfeldt's photographs in Galleries 8 and 9. Can you make a comparison between these abstract images and the work of Gert and Uwe Tobias?

Think about other things around you that are abstract, such as fabric patterns, scrap and waste material or food packaging. Make your own abstract collage from found materials.

Use squared paper to make an image using simple geometric shapes.

Karl Blossfeldt

Galleries 8 and 9

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Karl Blossfeldt (1865–1932) is recognised as one of the key figures in the development of 20th century photography.

As a self-taught photographer, Blossfeldt used this newly emerging medium to support his argument that all forms created by man. Building a series of cameras with interchangeable lenses, he was able to examine his botanical specimens in unprecedented, microscopic detail revealing their tactile nature, intricate forms and uncanny characteristics.

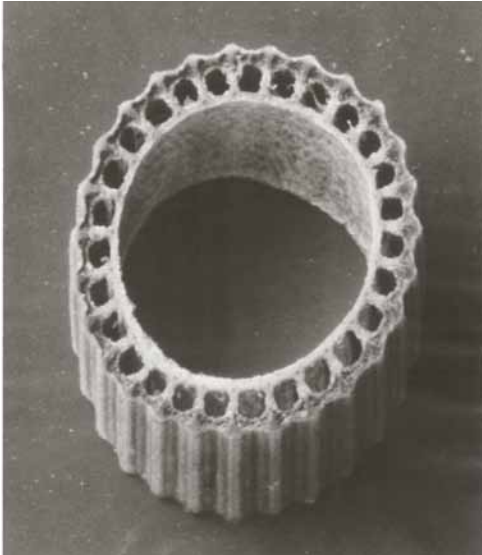
Blossfeldt produced the majority of his photographs during his tutorship in Berlin where he worked in relative obscurity until he was invited to exhibit at Karl Nierendorf's gallery in 1926. With the encouragement of this gallerist, Blossfeldt brought together a number of his images of plants in one volume, a selection of which are shown here. The response to the first edition by such figures as critic Walter Benjamin repositioned Blossfeldt at the heart of debates around modern art and photography.

This exhibition looks at the circulation and use of these images through such activities as book production, teaching and exhibition making. It also considers the reaction to the publication in 1928 of Blossfeldt's *Urformen der Kunst* (*Artforms in Nature*). Shown alongside his book works are five, rarely-seen 'working collages', which are believed to have assisted Blossfeldt in the editing and organisation of material for his publications. While they follow a format that we are now familiar with through conceptual art practice's analysis through a grid structure, they demonstrate how Blossfeldt at an early stage, categorised his subject matter and drew comparisons between diverse natural forms.



Take some time to consider the collages on display. Blossfeldt used collage and created photographic studies as a way to process, assess and compare the photographs he produced.

Think about the effect of presenting photographs in a grid.
How does this alter perception of the image when viewed as a whole?



Use old magazines and cut out images to create collages of images formatted in a grid, keeping in mind categories, colour, size and layout.

Repeat the exercise, this time with the whole class responding to the same theme or category. Discuss the process for selection and compare the resulting collages.

Gallery 8

Karl Blossfeldt trained as a sculptor and taught at what is now Berlin University of the Arts from the late 19th century until his death in 1932. Throughout his career, Blossfeldt amassed a vast body of botanical photographs that are now acknowledged for the critical role that they played in new approaches to observation and scale, heralding the transition from Art Nouveau's preoccupation with form to Modernism's analytical methods. Gallery 8 shows over 80 images that were used by Blossfeldt in his teaching practice. These photographs acted as a tool to assist students in his plant modelling class and simultaneously formed part of the research and development of Blossfeldt's argument for the primacy of natural form over man-made constructions.

The subsequent publication of a selection of these images in 1928 caught the attention of artists including Bauhaus tutor László Moholy-Nagy, who applied Blossfeldt's close scrutiny of flora to the emerging tendency of New Objectivity photography, which opposed expressionistic form in favour of a direct approach to recording subject matter. The final selection of works in this Gallery focuses on Blossfeldt's exhibition-making with a series of seldom shown, larger-scale prints that are understood to have been produced for Blossfeldt's first display at Karl Nierendorf's gallery in 1926. These are shown with a number of journals and magazines such as *Atlantis*, *Documents* and *UHU* that demonstrate the way in which Blossfeldt's practice was recontextualised within the discourses of Surrealism in the period immediately after his death in 1932.

Blossfeldt dissected plants beyond recognition and used photography to magnify, progressively simplify and break down the natural unity of plants, resulting in abstracted images.

It was Blossfeldt's belief that 'all man-made forms had their origins in nature'. Looking at the photographs in Gallery 8, can you find images that support this theory?

Collect images of buildings from books, magazines or the internet. Can you find images from nature that have a similar form? Display 'matching' images in pairs next to each other.



Blossfeldt's direct approach to observation and close scrutiny of plants led to him become a pioneer of the New Objectivity movement which arose in Germany in the 1920s as a response to Expressionism.

Research other photographers associated with the New Objectivity movement, for example Bernd and Hilla Becher (who were greatly influenced by Blossfeldt) and Albert Renger-Parzsch. What are the key traits and commonalities between the works of these artists?

Think about the process Blossfeldt uses in his meticulous studies of plants. Choose an everyday object and take a series of stills as a tool for investigation, experimenting with magnification and scale.

Repeat the exercise, this time outdoors, choosing larger objects to photograph (for example buildings, trees, vehicles).

Children's Art Commission, Simon & Tom Bloor: Loose Parts

Galleries 5 and 6

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Every year the Gallery commissions an artist to create a work of art that engages children. Birmingham and London based artists Simon and Tom Bloor present an interactive installation that transforms the Gallery walls into a giant blackboard for visitors to draw on.

Loose Parts considers the utopian potential of creativity and play. Developed from workshops during a year-long residency at Hermitage Primary School, Tower Hamlets, small clay sculptures were crushed and shaped by children, instigating a sense of playful rebellion within the school.

This act of 'encouraged vandalism' led to the making of chalk sculptures that can now be used by visitors to draw, write or doodle on the Gallery walls. Alongside these sculptures, a series of print works recall the process of creation through destruction.

The exhibition title refers to artist and architect Simon Nicholson's 'Theory of Loose Parts', first published in 1971, which proposes that 'loose parts' in our environment empower creativity in children and adults alike. Simon and Tom Bloor (b. 1973) work across a variety of materials and formats from drawing, installation and sculpture to public art. Much of their work is inspired by the urban landscape as well as 20th Century art and design.



Display cases in the Gallery show the small clay sculptures made by Simon and Tom Bloor, crushed and destroyed by the children. Images of the destruction in process can be seen around the Gallery. Imagine how the children would have felt when they were asked to do this and as a group make a list of words to describe these feelings.



The clay forms were cast and made into chalk sculptures that can be used by visitors to draw on the walls. Pick one up and try to fit your hand around the imprint.

Use the chalk to draw or write on the walls – do you draw in the same way that you would on paper? Are you normally allowed to draw on walls?

The 'Theory of Loose Parts', devised by artist and architect Simon Nicholson, argues that children love to experiment with variables, or 'loose parts', in our environment. Some examples of loose parts are: sounds, smells, shapes, materials, animals, words, ideas and music.

Nicholson defined the theory of loose parts as the following:

'In any environment, both the degree of inventiveness and creativity, and the possibility of discovery are directly proportional to the number and kind of variables in it.'

Think about the structure you have previously set for creative activity in the classroom. How could you encourage the potential for exploration and outcomes to evolve naturally by increasing and varying the supply of 'loose parts' for example by providing pupils with a broader set of materials to use, or by giving them an open-ended brief to respond to?

The Bloomberg Commission: Giuseppe Penone: Spazio di Luce (Space of Light) Gallery 2

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Repeating the Forest

A shelter, a ceiling of trees, a floor of trees, a wall of trees. If you look at a ceiling, a floor, a wall of wood, you see the trunks, branches, leaves. It is helpful if you can understand from the design of the wood the shape of the trunk, of the branches, of every single tree. The glance that runs along the wood's structure, passes across the shape of the tree as insects have done.

Giuseppe Penone, Spazio di Luce, 1969



The latest Bloomberg Commission for Gallery 2 is of the work of Italian artist Giuseppe Penone (b. 1947, Garessio, Italy), who over the past 45 years has examined society's understanding of nature, insisting that the spheres of culture and nature are inextricably linked. In the late 1960s, he became associated with the innovative Italian group Arte Povera, who inspired by the radical politics of the time and frustrated by the limitations of academic art education, embraced diverse sculptural practices and materials for their work to have a wider social impact. Trees and nature have been a consistent theme and life-long preoccupation in Penone's work. In his early career, he performed many 'actions' or performances (which survive only as photographs) that took place in forests near Turin and his home town of Garessio.

Walk around Penone's sculpture of a tree, looking inside, through and all around the space of the Gallery. If you are drawn to touching the sculpture, go ahead.

The sculpture was made specifically for this former library space.

How does the bronze cast of a tree relate to the history of the space?

Does encountering the sculpture remind you of an experience you have had outdoors?

How does the atmosphere in the Gallery compare to that of the street outside?

Work in Focus: *Space of Light*, 2012

Why is this work called Space of Light?

Why do you think the artist allows you to touch it when usually you can't touch sculpture in a Gallery?

What is it made from and how was it made?

What does a tree symbolize to you?

This bronze cast of a larch tree felled in a valley in Turin was made through an ancient process called 'lost wax' casting, where the interior and exterior of the tree are deliberately reversed. It was cut into stand alone sections in Penone's studio, covered in a layer of silicone, then wax and finally plaster. Liquid bronze was poured into the area where the wax was, melting it and creating a layer of bronze with the interior then being painted with gold leaf. It is important for Penone that the material is bronze - a natural, vegetable product that was heated by burning wood, linking to the lifecycle of the tree.

When we look up vertically at trees, we see how they move towards the light and how they grow, but in Penone's piece the light is within. The artist is interested in how we relate to the natural world through touch - for example, the fingerprints on the outside protect the memory of the many hand's involved in the sculpture's making. He feels it is important to understand through touch rather than sight - one of the primary reasons he moved from painting to sculpture as an artist. Although *Spazio di Luce* is a monument to nature, it is not the artist's intention for it to be a statement on contemporary environmental issues. Penone is interested in human interaction with and perception of the environment, and our relationship to the ecosystems we inhabit, believing the immediate encounter to be of utmost importance.

Action: In the Gallery and beyond

Materials: paper, charcoal, graphite, pencil

- Using Penone's drawings in the Annex space as inspiration, create your own rubbing.
- Look around the space you are in (whether it's the Gallery or your school) at a piece of wood in the floor/ ceiling or as part of a piece of furniture.
- Using rubbing techniques, discover the different edges and textures with charcoal or graphite on paper.
- Find out what it is made from and what the tree it is made from may have looked like as a young sapling.
- Draw the block of wood with the sapling in it in a similar way to Penone.

Action: In the Gallery and beyond

Materials: pens/ pencils and paper

Throughout his career, Penone reflected on his work by writing poetic sayings. Some of these are listed in the Annex space, such as *Repeating the Forest* listed above.

Create your own poem in response to *Spazio di Luce* and the space it is in:

- Think about what the former library that is now home to Penone's work would have looked like, and write down some descriptions - e.g. walls lined with books, people reading etc.
- Think about what the space is used for now by observing other people in the Gallery space.
- In the same way that in *Repeating the Forest*, Penone talks about the trees that the walls, ceiling and floor used to be made from; write some descriptive text or a poem about how the Gallery used to be a library and what it's used for now.

Further information

Material from Penone's archive is included in a series of displays around the themes of Imprint, Positive/ Negative, Touch and Light in the adjacent space including writings, sketches and photographs.

A short film including an interview with Penone can be found here and outside the exhibition: whitechapelgallery.org/exhibitions/the-bloomberg-commission-giuseppe-penone-spazio-di-luce

Find Out More

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Self-directed Gallery Visits

Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays during term time.

Clore Creative Studio and throughout the Gallery.

Book a free self-directed visit including use of the Clore Creative Studio. Free school and family resources for current shows now available online.

Teachers' CPD: Inset Days & Twilight Sessions

Primary: 4 July – The Spirit of Utopia with Daniel Wallis (4 – 6pm).

Secondary: 9 July – The Spirit of Utopia with Daniel Wallis (4 – 6pm)

Discover new ways of introducing your students to the Gallery's exhibitions and resources in these inspiring new artist-led CPD sessions for primary and secondary school teachers.

In association with Tower Hamlets Arts and Music Service.

Clore Creative Studio & Galleries (Free. Refreshments included. Booking required).

All Schools & Teachers' activity free of charge.

Booking required. To find out more and book schools or teachers events contact: education@whitechapelgallery.org

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