

The background features a complex, abstract geometric composition. Large, overlapping planes in shades of light blue, white, and dark blue create a sense of depth and perspective. On the right side, the dark silhouette of a man's head and shoulders is visible in profile, looking towards the left. The overall aesthetic is clean, modern, and architectural.

# Education Resource Actions and Reactions Whitechapel Gallery

**The Bloomberg Commission:  
Josiah McElheny:  
The Past Was a Mirage I Left Far Behind  
7 September 2011–15 July 2012**

## Introduction

McElheny describes his exhibition *The Past was a Mirage I had Left Far Behind* as “a sort of multi-layered multi-facet project; a physical manifestation of different layers and different facets”.

This resource is intended to give an insight into some of these layers and to consider various elements of the work both singly and as they work together. It provides ideas for activities in the Gallery and further extensions of these that can be developed after your visit.

It aims to support your exploration of the exhibition and give you ideas to share with others in your group, whatever their age.

Quotations by Josiah McElheny are taken from his interview with Daniel F. Herrmann, the Curatorial Programme Manager at Whitechapel Gallery.

**An accompanying box of materials that you may require for these activities is available for you to book out prior to your visit. Please contact Tara Brown, Education Administrator on 0207 522 7894 or email: [education@whitechapelgallery.org](mailto:education@whitechapelgallery.org)**

### Respond First

**“I guess that my main interest in being an artist is being part of a community in which one can be connected to a dialogue about ideas, and that the ideas are both collective but also individually-generated.”**

**Josiah McElheny**

We can use language as part of a dialogue to communicate with each other our thoughts and ideas. McElheny says he is not aiming for originality with his work; he is exploring a historical form and changing it, doubling, tripling, refracting. Play with language.

### Language Activity:

1. Spend 5 minutes walking around the exhibition. Use a piece of tracing paper and a black pen to write 5 words in response. Share your words with a friend. Do you have any that are the same? Have your friends' words given you new ideas?
2. Now write a sentence in response to the exhibition. Read it out loud to a friend but read it in reverse order starting with your last word. Does your friend understand you?
3. Write down another 20 words in response to the exhibition. If you find it hard to generate 20 words divide it into different categories in your head:  
What are the objects that you can see; what materials are used; what media is being used; how does it make you feel; which different senses are being used; what does it remind you of in your life; what do you recognise; what don't you recognise?
4. Cut the words out. Drop them on the floor. Rearrange and write them in a list.  
Play with your words, say them twice, say them three times, and say them backwards. Do they still make sense to you? With a partner combine your words and then choose the twenty that you feel best describes your joint response to the exhibition.
5. Make them into a poem. Read it forwards. Read it backwards.
6. Reshuffle and reread. Read in 7 different ways (loud, soft, angry, bored, excited.....)
7. Read the words whilst watching the film. Do the words match what is happening? Keep repeating as the film changes. Do your words make a good soundtrack? Rehearse on your own then perform your response poem for your group. Discuss each other's responses.

### Extension:

This activity can be done as a starting point for every exhibition you see to capture your initial response.

**Really Look**

McElheny describes the sculptures as being “simple objects making this quite complex image.”

**Looking Activity:**

- 1. As you walk carefully around the exhibition use your looking tube (cardboard roll) to look carefully at every section. There are 7 big sculptures in the room. Are they what you expect sculptures to look like?
- 2. Use your looking tube to focus on the basic facts.

What materials and technological media has McElheny used? Think about every single physical thing he uses to construct the work and don't forget those that are not visible!  
How have the sculptures been installed?

- 3. When you've worked out the basics consider the bigger picture. The seven sculptures are fundamentally the same but each is a variation. Can you work out how they are different from each other, how McElheny has altered and extended?

**Reflect and Reverse**

To do this activity you may first need to find a mirror to look in.

**“The mirrors are used to extend the image...in different ways to the right, to the left, up and down infinite”  
Josiah McElheny**

**Mirror Activity**

Now use a mirror to explore the exhibition and inspect how the sculptures are made. If you take a small mirror to a stick you can carefully look around the exhibition and see things from unusual angles. Experiment:

- 1. If you use your mirror to look in a mirror what happens?  
Hold it at different angles and experiment with where you place it.  
Can you multiply what you see?  
Can you reflect the whole room?  
Can you reflect your friends?
- 2. Draw something you see reflected in your mirror. Only draw what is reflected but do draw everything that you see in your mirror. Place your mirror on top of your finished drawing. Move it around the paper.  
How does it alter what you've drawn?  
Place it upright, at an angle.  
Can you make your drawing disappear?
- 3. If you have a camera move your mirror slowly across the page and photograph the reflection every centimetre. Replay the photographs on your camera to watch the sequence as it expands. You have made a short film.
- 4. Hold them at different angles and see how many variations you can make. Use 2 mirrors, then 3, and then 4.

### **Extension:**

McElheny uses light, transparency and mirrors in much of his artwork. He often uses his training as a glassblower to create remarkable glass sculptures which become reflected and refracted in perfect shiny mirrors.

1. After the exhibition research his previous work to see how he has used mirrors in other ways.
2. Tape a mirror to a stick/paint brush and use it to look at things in your classroom. Can you see things from unusual angles? Do things look different in the mirror? Have you managed to abstract the familiar and make it unfamiliar?

Draw or photograph what you see. Lay out the results in a sequence like a sequence of images from a film.

3. Make a sculpture using wood and mirrors – you might use a reflective material instead. Project a film onto it. McElheny wanted this exhibition to allow others to have more decisions, ask your friends to choose or make a film to project.

### **Abstraction:**

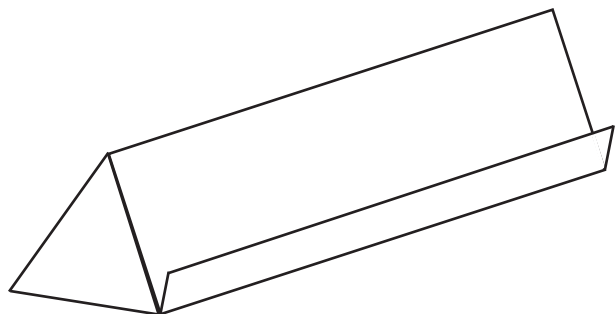
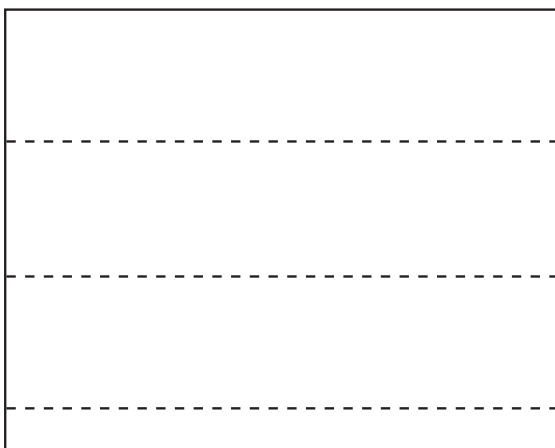
**“I think that I’m interested in abstraction because it’s about a physical system, or a language, that in theory allows one to imagine a new world... but also it’s very important, and art has often thought about this - imagining a new future... a future in which you erase the past and begin again - that is some of the origin of abstraction itself.”**

**Josiah McElheny**

### **‘Abstractoscope’ Activity:**

Experiment with the process of abstracting language and systems that you have already created.

1. Fold a sheet of acetate 4 times. Fold into a pyramid lengthways and use tape to stick down the overlapping edge. Put your acetate pyramid inside your looking tube (cardboard roll).



2. Use a rubber band to attach the tracing paper with response words that you wrote earlier, over the end of the tube. You will be looking down the tube at them so make sure the side with your words written on faces into the tube.

3. Attach a black square of paper over the other end and make a hole in the centre (you can use your pencil to punch a hole, you might want to experiment with the size). This is the hole you look into to see your words.

4. Look into the light, your words will be reflected in the acetate; you can rotate the paper to change their reflection. Your words are mirrored, distorted, fragmented. This is one possible way of abstracting your words.

You can also use squares of drawings – make sure the paper you use is translucent like tracing paper to let the light through.

**Extension:**

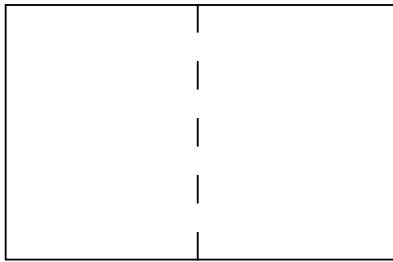
This activity is based on making a kaleidoscope, which is typically filled with reflective glass beads and metal. Experiment with other objects that reflect such as shiny confetti, tinsel or screwed up balls of tin foil. Experiment with the size of your tube.

**Sketchbook Activity:**

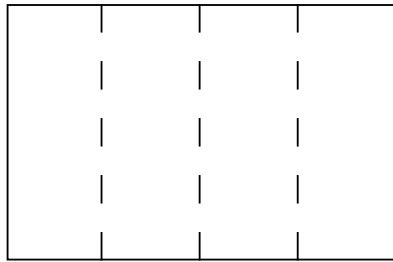
McElheny's screens and mirrors fold and unfold to extend an image, there is no ideal view. Use a sheet of A4 paper to extend and abstract your own.

1. Make a sketch of part of the exhibition; it might be part of a film, a section of sculpture, a shadow on the wall.
2. Fold your paper according to the instructions and make into a book. The sections of image have been re-arranged and abstracted.
3. If you rearrange your folds you can change the image again.
4. If you hold it up and push the ends towards each other the central section becomes a square, which might represent the gallery walls.
5. How many ways can you rearrange you image?

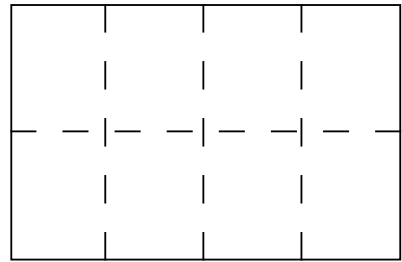
**Sketchbook Activity:**



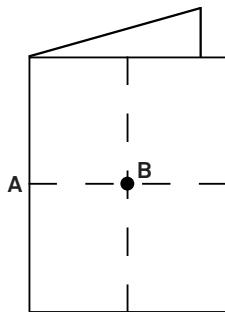
1. Fold your paper in half. Open up.



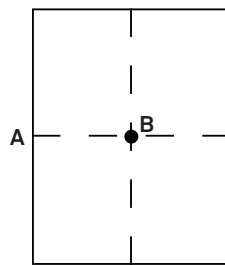
2. Fold your sections in half. Open up. You should have creases in your paper that look like this.



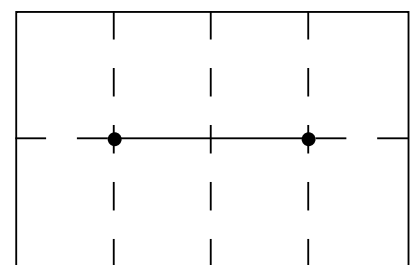
3. Fold your paper in half lengthways. Open up.



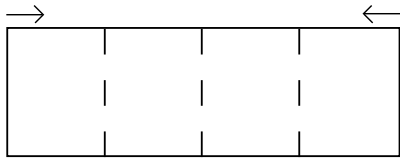
4. Fold your paper in half along the vertical middle. Keep folded.



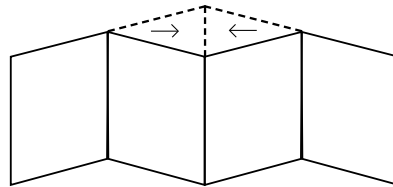
5. Using scissors make a cut from A to B with A being the folded edge.



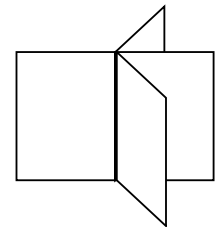
6. Open up your paper. You should have a cut across the horizontal middle.



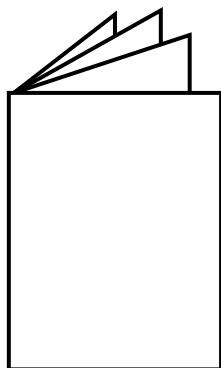
7. Fold you paper in half lengthways. Holding each end gently push them towards each other.



8. A space should appear like this.



9. Keep pushing until the paper looks like this.



10. Firmly fold the paper together to make your sketchbook.

**Extension:**

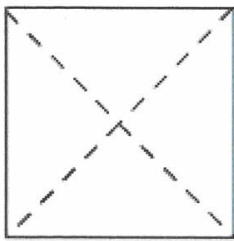
**Origami Abstract Fortune-Teller Activity:**

McElheny uses a pyramid of mirrors that reflects the films in four directions. Follow the paper folding instructions to make an origami abstract fortune-teller.

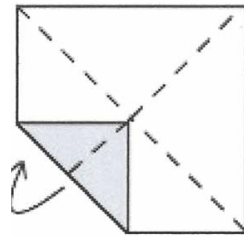
1. Draw on a square piece of paper and then fold into shape. Open and shut. Do it in front of a mirror.
2. On the faces write 2 nouns 2 verbs, 2 adjectives and 2 adverbs that relate to the exhibition. Open and shut very fast. Read out loud. Change the sequence
3. Or draw 8 shapes. You might find them in shadows, or clouds, in mirrors or in your imagination.

If you use mirrored paper what happens to the images reflected in the paper?

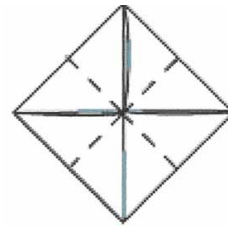
1. Fold each corner to the opposite corner. Open paper up. You should have creases in your paper that look like this



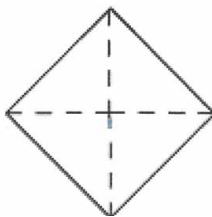
2. Fold corners to the centre of the paper



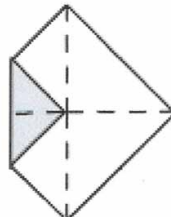
3. Now your paper should look like this



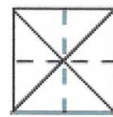
4. Now turn your paper over so the folds you made are face down



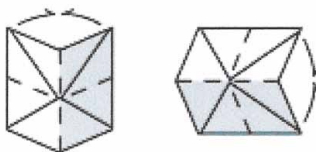
5. Just like in step 2 fold all corners to the centre of the paper



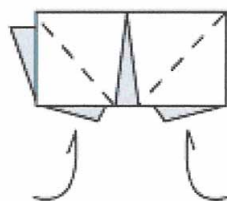
6. Your paper should now look something like this



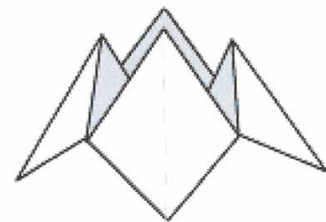
7. Now fold your paper in half vertically and horizontally



8. Insert your fingers underneath the tabs



9. Finished product



### **Abstraction Activity:**

1. Draw something you know and recognise easily.
2. Enlarge it on the photocopier. You will lose some of the image but can you still recognise it?
3. Photocopy and enlarge it again
4. Photocopy and enlarge it again. Can you recognise it now?

By changing its scale and reducing it to a fragment you have abstracted an image.

### **Audience:**

**“It’s about the people looking at these things as opposed to the things themselves.....The viewer becomes the author, because without the viewer it is impossible to discern the something, or even the nothing that is there.”**

**“On the side where it’s (the projected film) not happening, it kind of changes the space and changes one’s ability to navigate the space easily.....a kind of slight disorientation”.**

**Josiah McElheny**

### **Mapping Activity:**

Work in pairs.

1. On your paper map each other’s presence in the exhibition, both literal and reflected, by taking it in turns to stand in one spot and chart on the paper the other’s route as they move around the Gallery.
2. Sometimes your partner might be reflected in a mirror so invent a symbol to represent this on your map. The symbol might change depending on if they are reflected in a plain mirror or a reflected film.
3. If you can see other visitors in the space add them to your map with a special symbol.  
Do this for five minutes then swap around.
4. Use your mirrors to reflect your maps and abstract them further. Can you find a mirror that will reflect your map many times?

### **Record and Reorganise:**

**“I wanted there to be a series of other voices...(the films the experts could choose) anyone who has made abstract film in the last 90 years.....It collapses history and says something done in 2007 might be comparable with something done in 1936 and in the Czech Republic versus the United States...but that’s part of the point...we can reassemble and re-collage history in order to better understand the present”.**

**Josiah McElheny**

McElheny has invited 4 experts in abstract film to collaborate with him by choosing an hour-long showreel of their favorite films resulting in a subjective history of abstraction. Each showreel will be projected for a number of weeks throughout the exhibition so if you return later in the year you may have a different experience.

The showreels show films in the order of the newest to the oldest, the films are played backwards and then the mirrors extend and reverse again.



### **Film and Abstraction Activity:**

1. Create your own abstract filmstrip in the gallery. Start by together watching a film for 3 minutes.
2. Each working on A4 paper, draw an image inspired by what you watched.
3. Place your images in a line on the floor; each one represents one frame of a film.
4. Walk along the line from beginning to end.
5. Think about editing and rearranging. Are some of the frames similar, should they be grouped together or at intervals?
6. You can stand in a line holding up your frames. Give each one a title. Say the title out loud in a row. You are animating your frames and performing.
7. The showreels are played backwards. Stand in a row in order of your birthdays, but start with December and work backwards. Are there other ways of arranging yourselves?
8. Some of the films may contain symbols that you recognize. Record these symbols on paper. Experiment with reflections and reversals. Again line the drawings up in a row to make a linear layout. You could photograph each image and then look at them quickly on your camera one after the other.

Extension:

Later you could put your images onto your computer to make a slide show.

If you can play an instrument try playing a piece of music backwards as a soundtrack.

### **Research:**

“(Bernard Kops)...**Spoke of the library as a prosaic place and with the ability to connect one to an infinitely large world”.**

**Josiah McElheny**

McElheny was invited to make this artwork as part of a series of exhibitions called the Bloomberg Commission, which are exhibited in Gallery 2. This was previously the reading room of the former Whitechapel Library and the commissioned artists are asked to respond to this fact and make their work site specific.

As part of McElheny’s research whilst developing his ideas Daniel F. Herrmann, the Curatorial Programme Manager at Whitechapel Gallery, introduced him to a poem called Whitechapel Library, Aldgate East by Bernard Kops, a writer who was born in the East End of London.

The following is an extract from the poem and shows the section McElheny took the title of his exhibition from.

I emerged out of childhood with nowhere to hide  
when a door called my name  
and pulled me inside.  
And being so hungry I fell on the feast.  
Whitechapel Library, Aldgate East.  
And my brain explodes when I suddenly find,  
an orchard within for the heart and the mind.  
The past was a mirage I’d left far behind  
And I am a locust and I’m at a feast.  
Whitechapel Library, Aldgate East.  
And Rosenberg also came to get out of the cold  
To write poems of fire, but he never grew old.  
And here I met Chekhov, Tolstoy, Meyerhold.  
I read all their worlds, their dark visions of gold.  
The reference library, where my thoughts were to rage.  
I ate book after book, page after page.  
I scoffed poetry for breakfast and novels for tea.  
And plays for my supper. No more poverty  
.....

Kops makes reference to the writers who inspired him, whose works he devoured hungrily. McElheny also discovered that the library was used by early modernist thinkers such as Isaac Rosenberg and Mark Gertler who he himself has read about and learnt from.

**“It seems like it has a whole series of connections to the project...not so much that it’s a particular meaning that describes the content of the exhibition but its more that it’s a phrase, it’s language that comes from Whitechapel yet also kind of evokes the thematic hopes of the exhibition”.**

**Josiah McElheny**

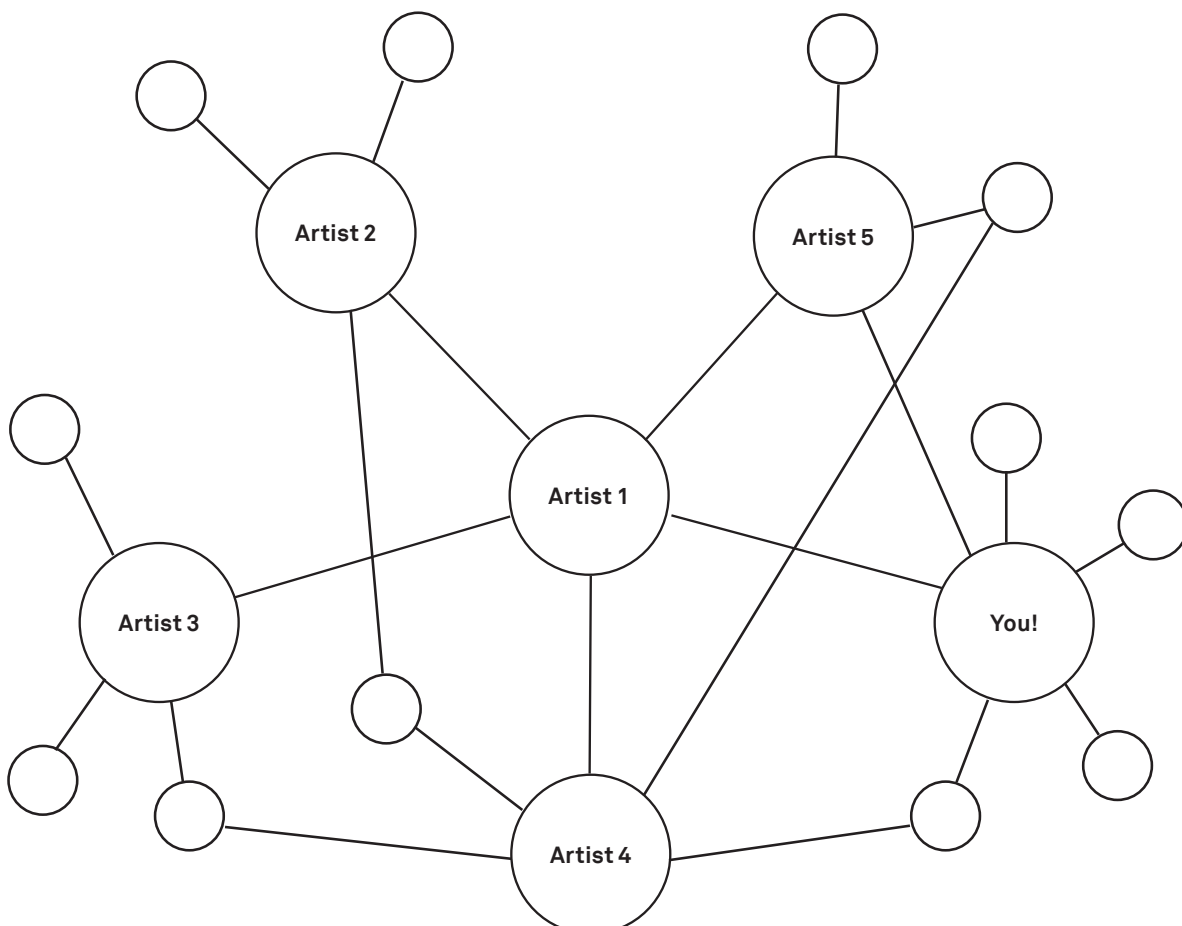
**Poem Activity:**

Write a short poem in response to a different room in the Gallery or another environment that has inspired you.

**Extension:**

**Six Degrees of Separation Activity:**

1. Choose an artist whose work you admire. Research them in your library or on the Internet. (Remember you can ask your library to reserve you books from other libraries.)
2. Which artists or writers influenced them? Choose one and research their work. Collect images.
3. You could make a mind map starting with your first artist in the centre and then build outwards.
4. When you have researched five different artists/writers look at your research as a whole. Can you see connections between the first and last. Is there an idea you would like to develop, into an artwork or a piece of writing or a film?
5. You will become the 6th connection and now be connected to the first.



## **Reflection:**

Reflecting is something we do by thinking about our experiences and our past.

**“If an artist can play the role of someone who reinvents their own take on history, politics, or grand philosophical ideas but in this very individual personal way then perhaps that forms an example to encourage that kind of thinking within other people and its not for them to think as the artist thinks but to think as they think”.**

**Josiah McElheny**

Take time to think about your own response to this exhibition after your visit.

**The exhibition itself unfolds and expands over the course of the year**

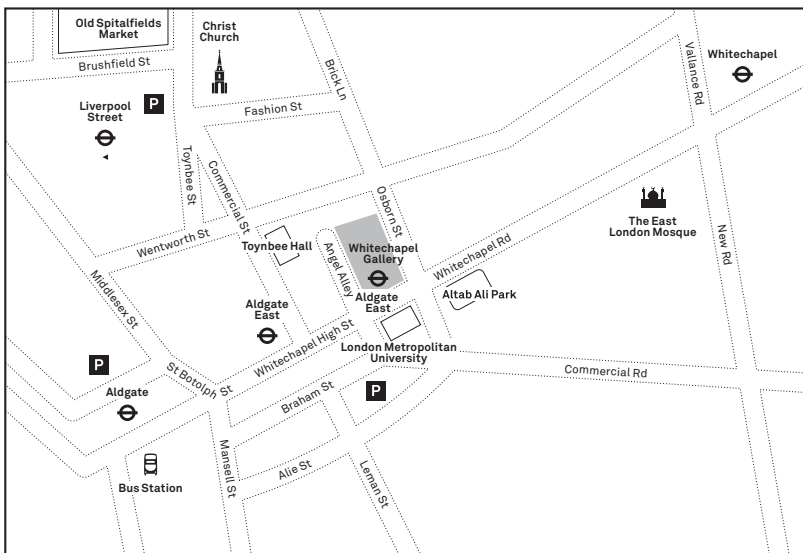
Return to the Gallery later in the year to see a different showreel of films.

**“This project is new to me in that I have used history before and I have done collaborative works before but this is one where I’m setting up a situation and then allowing it to unfold in a way that I can’t predict it all and this is maybe something that will influence me in the future.”**

**Josiah McElheny**

You could discuss your visit to Whitechapel Gallery again in a year’s time!

This Educational Resource was written by artist Sarah Carne.



## **Find out more**

To book your free group visit and use our Education Space (available Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday during term time) please call Education on **020 7522 7888** or email: [education@whitechapelgallery.org](mailto:education@whitechapelgallery.org)

If you have enjoyed this Educational Resource or have any other feedback please do contact us.

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