

Collective Acts

Reflections on 15 Years of Duchamp & Sons

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15 Years of Duchamp & Sons: An Introduction

2025 marks 15 years of Duchamp & Sons, Whitechapel Gallery's youth collective, and with it a generation of collaboration between young people.

Much has changed since the collective first convened in early 2010 – seven different UK Prime Ministers, the stratospheric rise of social media, a global pandemic, plus multiple international crises and liberation campaigns. It's been a period of seismic change, and young people have been at the forefront.

In the context of this change, Duchamp & Sons has persisted, meeting regularly on Wednesday evenings to exchange ideas, share food and conversation, and devise new creative work. Around 200 young people have been part of the collective, with some staying for a few months, and others for over half a decade.

For most members, Duchamp & Sons coincides with a formative part of their lives as they move towards adulthood, experiment with their identity, and face decisions about their futures.

To mark the collective's 15th birthday, we've been researching what impact creative, collaborative youth collective spaces have on young people during this pivotal time in their lives, and what we can all learn from a programme like Duchamp & Sons.

We've delved into the archives and spoken to over fifty alumni, as well as contributing artists, and Gallery staff, past and present, to hear about their experiences.

We hope this research offers useful insight and tools for other people working in collaborative ways with young people, and highlights the vitality of spaces dedicated to being creative and in community with others.

Scope of the Research

The research aims to capture a range of testimonies, perspective and experiences over the past 15 years. Since summer 2024, there have been 19 interviews with past members, staff and artists, 48 responses to an alumni survey, a workshop with current Whitechapel Gallery staff, conversations with sector colleagues at over 10 institutions nationally and internationally, and many hours spent reviewing archival materials.

Core Questions of Research

1. What has been the impact of the Duchamp & Sons youth collective on the young people who have been a part of it from 2010-2024?
2. What are the key learnings from the programme which should inform future planning?

The Wider Context: Participation at Whitechapel Gallery

Duchamp & Sons forms part of Whitechapel Gallery's youth programme, which sits within the Participation team. As of 2025, the department consists of four programming strands — Families, Schools & Teachers, Youth, Public Programmes — as well as the Gallery's Archive. Working across a range of audiences, our participation programmes are united by a commitment to experimental, open, process-orientated collaborations with artists, participants and creative partners.

Alone Together: Youth Forum with Seth Pimlott (2018), image by Dan Weill.



Who are Duchamp & Sons?

Duchamp & Sons is Whitechapel Gallery's youth collective for 15-24 year olds. They meet regularly at the Gallery to experiment with art, share space for food and conversation, and create exhibitions, events, and new artworks as a collective.

Since 2010 Duchamp & Sons have collaborated with each other and various contemporary artists on projects ranging from participatory exhibitions to gallery takeovers, films to an experimental EP, archival investigations to creating their own manifesto.

Currently, D&S consists of around 20 members. From autumn to spring the group collaborate with artists on creative projects four to eight months in length, while in the early summer, during peak exam season, the group turn their attention to drop-in studio or exhibition visits, workshops, and insight sessions, before taking an annual summer break.

Outside of D&S sessions, efforts are made to offer bespoke support to members where possible in terms of mentorship, and paid work opportunities. Members are free to remain in the group for multiple years, and upon leaving are welcomed into the D&S alumni community where they receive regular updates and are invited to attend Young Creatives Nights which are programmed by D&S alumni.

Recruitment to the collective prioritises those aged 15-19, from Tower Hamlets and surrounding East London boroughs, from backgrounds currently underrepresented in the arts, and with least prior access to similar opportunities.

As of autumn 2024, 75% of current members are from East London boroughs and over 35% are from Tower Hamlets itself.

Curator: Youth Programmes

Another core member of the Duchamp & Sons collective is the Whitechapel Gallery staff member Curator: Youth Programmes, who coordinates and oversees the overall programme, alongside the groups projects, sessions, and pastoral care.

Since 2010, five Whitechapel Gallery staff members have held this role, or equivalent, with all of them contributing to this research — Marijke Steedman, Paul Crook, Vicky Carmichael, Renee Odjidja, and Amelia Oakley (current).

Duchamp & Sons: Manifesto

We are Duchamp & Sons.

We are a group of young people.

We are creative, forward moving, diverse, interesting and curious.

We are always transforming.

We meet, we talk, we eat.

We meet at Whitechapel Gallery to share ideas. We collaborate with each other and with artists who join us on our quest to create.

We ask questions.

Will the art of today be significant for tomorrow?

Can we give a voice to things that matter to us?

Can we collaborate creatively?

Do our passions define us?

We are an open group.

We are constantly striving for both personal and collective change. Our values bring us together as a passionate community. Authenticity, individuality, creativity and respect.

What connects us are the interests we share and the projects we do.

We find common ground through experiencing new things together. The Gallery is a platform for us to conjure crazy, silly ideas and expand our curiosity and interests.

Being part of Duchamp & Sons gives you a key into the arts.

We explore the elusive world of art. We use our personal connections to art and young people to bridge the two.

We are the past. We are the present. We are the future.

WE
ARE
DUCHAMP
& SONS

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Duchamp & Sons Manifesto (2017), design by Joe Hales

Duchamp & Sons: A History

Duchamp & Sons in its current form began in early 2010. However, it was predated by a series of other efforts to establish a peer-led youth programme at Whitechapel Gallery, as well as a history of education programming which dates back to the Gallery's 1901 inception.

The collective emerged at a time when peer-led youth programmes were beginning to grow in popularity in gallery spaces. This was in part due to a growing prioritisation of youth audiences across the sector in the mid-2000s, and as well as the success of pioneering offers like the **Teen Council** (1992) at Walker Art Center in the US, and **Young Tate** (1994) at Tate Liverpool.

1996	A three year plan 'Work with young people at Whitechapel Art Gallery' intending to create an expanded youth offer is drawn up at Whitechapel Gallery. Archive records suggest this did not lead to significantly increased youth specific programming at this time.
2006	'Talent Club' takes place — a pilot, accredited peer-led youth project.
2007	'The Whitechapel Research Project' acts as a follow up to Talent Club and aims to connect young people as researchers for 'The Whitechapel Project' — a major redevelopment and expansion of Whitechapel Gallery which sees it close to the public from February 2007. 2007–2008: Global Financial Crisis begins
2009	A Young Curators pilot programme takes place over two weeks in the summer led by Faisal Abdu' Allah, exploring what a regular youth forum offer at Whitechapel Gallery could be. April 2009: Whitechapel Gallery reopens to the public following expansion
2010	In January, a new regular Young Curators programme begins, coordinated by artist Lucy Panesar. The programme is part funded by the Louis Vuitton Young Arts Project (LVYAP), a three-year project supporting youth programmes at Tate Britain, Hayward Gallery, Royal Academy, South London Gallery and Whitechapel Gallery. In summer 2010, the group work with artist Lady Lucy on The Naming Project where they select a new name: 'Duchamp & Sons'. May 2010: Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government comes to power November 2010: Youth led protests erupt against the rise in University Tuition Fees
2011	The D&S programme at this time is made up of workshops, peer-led short projects, as well as engagement with the wider LVYAP cross organisational activity. August 2011: Riots take place in London, and later across the UK, following the killing of Mark Duggan in Tottenham by Police
2012	D&S work on projects including creating East End Abstract a film in dialogue with the Josiah McElheny exhibition, and an event inspired by the Gillian Wearing exhibition at the Gallery. Involvement in LVYAP cross organisational activity continues. Summer 2012: Olympics take place in Stratford, East London
2013	The group collaborate on a series of projects including a performance piece in collaboration with Jenny Moore.

2014	D&S work with Steven Morgana & Nick Wood on <i>De/Construct</i> , the first exhibition project formally developed with Duchamp & Sons to be displayed at the Gallery (Mar – Jun 2014).
2015	The collective work with Ruth Proctor on a project exploring luck and chance, and with Sam Curtis exploring participatory art-making. May 2015: Conservative party win majority
2016	D&S collaborate with Sophie Mallett to produce an interactive radio show, with Ian Giles on a new performance work, and later on a project with artist Chiara Ambrosio and creative practitioners from English National Opera. June 2016: The UK narrowly votes to leave the EU
2017	The collective develop their Manifesto with guest artist Ruth Beale. In the autumn they devise and launch an Open Call process for an artist to develop a new exhibition with them in 2018. June 2017: The Grenfell Fire takes place in West London
2018	D&S collaborate with Seth Pimlott on the <i>Alone Together</i> exhibition (May – Aug 2018). In the autumn they work with duo Wright & Vandame on the Whitechapel Gallery Café 1985 – 2007 installation project.
2019	D&S work on the <i>Visions of the Future</i> youth takeover in collaboration with Community Music and Siobhan Davies Dance. In the autumn they collaborate with Rosie Ridgway to create an EP. September 2019: Global Climate Strikes led by young people take place
2020	D&S begin to collaborate with Ayo Akingbade on a new film, with the project later transitioning online. In summer 2020, a group of 10 D&S members and alumni work on a new virtually curated exhibition <i>Home: Live > In Room</i> at the gallery (Aug 2020 – Jan 2021). March 2020: First Covid-19 lockdown begins
2021	The delayed exhibition <i>A Glittering City: Ayo Akingbade with Duchamp & Sons</i> runs at Whitechapel Gallery (May – Aug 2021). D&S work to develop and host the Virtual Studio Visits series of online public events. In autumn 2021 programming returns in person with the D&S archive project, in collaboration with bare minimum collective. July 2021: Most legal restrictions imposed as part of the third Covid-19 lockdown end
2022	D&S work on Mapping the Studio project with Shepherd Manyika and Ben Connors. In the Autumn, alum Gaby Sahhar returns to work with the collective on a new exhibition project, <i>Escape the Slick</i> . September – October 2022: Three different Prime Ministers within two months
2023	<i>Escape the Slick</i> runs at the gallery (Jan – Aug 2023) and D&S create a Gallery-wide takeover event to accompany the exhibition. In Autumn 2023, D&S collaborate with artist duo Knead on a new project exploring the creative potential of libraries.
2024	D&S work with Mohammed Z. Rahman on a project exploring space and identity. In Autumn 2024, D&S begin working with Holly Graham to devise a 2025 exhibition to coincide with the 15 year anniversary of Duchamp & Sons. July 2024: Labour Government comes to power
2025	<i>Moving Grounds: 15 Years of Duchamp & Sons</i> exhibition opens at Whitechapel Gallery in February 2025.

Summary of Key Findings

A potted summary of the key learnings uncovered during the research process, which are expanded in greater detail throughout the report.

Impact of Duchamp & Sons on the young people who have been a part of it

Personal Impacts

Improved confidence – In sharing their thoughts and ideas, being with other people, trying new things, and pursuing their interests.

Increased sense-of-self – Feeling seen and represented, and gaining an expanded view of the world and what art can be.

Enhanced wellbeing – Benefitting emotionally from the low pressure environment of D&S and the supportive community they experience, as well as having fun.

Relational Impacts

Friendships and peer mentorship relationships – Members have built friendships with peers outside of their normal circles, and have supported one another to build confidence, skills, and knowledge.

Feeling part of a collaborative creative community – The experience has led to teamwork and collaboration skills, and feelings of inclusion within a community and gallery spaces.

Feeling supported – Members feel safe and supported by the community to express themselves, and able to develop relationships rooted in trust with adults.

Professional Impacts

Gaining insight – Feeling able to make more informed and empowered decisions by becoming more knowledgeable about the sector, their own interests, and needs.

Gaining relevant career skills – Including soft skills like collaboration, communication, project development, facilitation, and organisation, as well as creative skills and artistic techniques.

Pursuing creative careers – 84% of those surveyed have continued to pursue study or work in the creative sector.

Key Learnings which should inform future planning

The importance of...

Community

Community is a central pillar of Duchamp & Sons, and its success. Members feeling enjoyment, supported, and able to make more empowered choices, could not happen without the sense of togetherness and collaboration which underscores the collective. It is grounded within relationships of trust, care and encouragement.

Agency

Ensuring a 'collective ownership' over projects is important, as it cements a sense of power in the group's collective voice and agency, which in turn supports individuals to feel able to advocate for themselves both within and outside of the group. It's not enough to simply provide space for creative experimentation behind closed doors, young people want to express their creative ideas publicly on the same terms as other artists. Providing space for this is key for young people to feel that they have true stake within gallery spaces and their creative and critical voices are valued.

Openness & Experimentation

Maintaining an open space for experimenting is vital to young people being exposed to new ideas and approaches, developing their own creative and critical voice, building confidence, and generating creative work which is genuinely developed through co-curation.

What's needed...

More trust, agency, and respect for young people

Ceding power to young people can lead to better creative projects, and ultimately to better institutions. However, often organisations do not create space for young people's perspectives to influence and enact organisational change. By creating this space, organisations could learn so much from youth collective members about non-hierarchical approaches, care practices, and innovative approaches to art making.

Better resourcing for youth programmes

The financial (and emotional) resource required to run youth collectives rooted in co-curation, is often underestimated by those who hold the metaphorical purse strings. Creating supportive pastoral environments, dynamic creative outputs, and holding room for experimentation is valuable work, and deserves to be allocated appropriate resources which reflect the true cost of the work and are par with those allocated to more 'traditional' art making.

Listen to what young people are telling us

To be impactful for young people, programmes must be relevant and take on board the needs of young people. When asked what young people interested in the creative sector need at this moment alumni highlighted: insight into creative pathways, financially stable career options, and supportive, caring, joyful environments as priorities.

De/Construct (2014) with Steven Morgana & Nick Wood



Duchamp & Sons x Mohammed Z. Rahman (2024), image by Anne Tetzlaff

Our Future Libraries (2023) with Kneed, image by Anne Tetzlaff



What has been the impact of the Duchamp & Sons youth collective on the young people who have been a part of it?

This research includes 59 separate pieces of testimony and reflection from Duchamp & Sons Alumni, representing over a quarter of all alumni. Some of these members stayed part of the group for less than a year, some for over five years. What connects them all is that D&S has impacted their lives in myriad ways.

Personal Impacts

On Confidence

One of the most common things we heard was the impact that Duchamp & Sons had on alumni's confidence, whether that was their confidence to express their thoughts and ideas, in being with other people, or to try new things and pursue their interests.

One alum recalled how when they joined D&S they'd "given up on education" after not getting into any universities and felt in a "vulnerable place". But after time in the group and encouragement from D&S peers and staff, they "got the courage to write another university application" and were accepted into every course. They reflected "if I hadn't done a youth group during that time I don't think I would have got in", as D&S "was intimate, you could work on your social skills" whilst also gaining confidence and insight into the creative sector.

"I had zero confidence and self-esteem and it felt like I found home"¹

This growth in confidence seems innately linked to the openness of the space fostered by the programme, and the importance placed on youth voice and agency. Another alum reflects how sessions helped her to "learn how to come out of my shell". She recalled, at D&S "your voice is heard, everyone there listens to you". This sense of acceptance and validation from peers and support staff is key; ideas, no matter how simple or experimental are welcomed and valued in the space, creating non-hierarchical structures in which young people can come to know their own voice and agency.

As well as this encouraging environment, the non-prescriptive nature of projects is also crucial. One alumni highlights D&S as a 'no pressure' environment, where participating in different ways depending on how you were feeling (i.e. taking a backseat sometimes) was always accommodated, which meant "it felt like a safe space to build up your skills and confidence". By creating this freedom for young people to choose and fluidly adjust the role they play within a room or a project, they come to learn more about exercising their agency and confidently expressing their needs and feelings in group settings.

¹ All quotes from Duchamp & Sons alumni, unless otherwise stated



Our Future Libraries (2023) with Knead, image by Anne Tetzlaff



Duchamp & Sons Manifesto project (2017)

“D&S helped me feel a little less self-conscious about myself and my interests. Here I could more closely express myself.”

“I joined D&S as a shy person and left as a confident, talkative and extroverted individual, I have developed a confidence of talking to newer people and sharing into discussions”

“It had a massive part in building my confidence in my creativity and sense of self. It allowed me to discover how to express my creativity using different mediums.”

“It set me up to be more confident going to uni. Because being in the arts isn’t a common place to end up for the Bengali community – it gave me confidence, being Bengali in that space.”

94% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement ‘I became more confident in my own ideas and sharing these with others’

On Sense of Self...

The 15-24 age range of Duchamp & Sons coincides with a vital time in the lives of young people where experimenting with and coming to understand their identity is central. For many, the experience of being part Duchamp & Sons contributed to this sense of self and ultimately to the development of their creative and critical voices.

One alum remembers “I was 17 when I was part of the film 'A Fire In My Belly.' At that time, I felt like I didn't have a voice to share my ideas, interests, and goals. Being involved in the film allowed me to start expressing myself, and it was really cool for me to see myself on screen in an art gallery.” They also noted the importance of being able to challenge stereotypes associated with young people through the film, highlighting how these experiences can also contribute to a collective sense of identity and solidarity.

Most Duchamp & Sons projects provide space for young people to explore their identity, politics, and lived experiences through art, for some for the very first time. But as this alum suggests it's not only this process of exploration which is key, it's also the public profiling of this work which gives it additional weight and can create a sense of validation.

It's important to acknowledge that the vast majority of D&S members are from marginalised backgrounds², and their sense of self and creative, critical and political voices are intrinsically linked to this experience. One alum remembers D&S as a process of “immersion in an industry that traditionally ostracises people that look like me”. Part of the group in 2011 at the time of Olympic gentrification and instability in East London, she highlights the importance of having a “consistent group that we could be creative with [...] and (had) a cultural affinity that took into account our sensitivities”.

She remembers D&S was “one of the first projects I did where my values as a person aligned with the project's aims” and that this alignment on values like “community, collaboration, and inclusive practice” was very much “felt by the cohort”. That is to say that Duchamp & Sons fosters this space to develop one's sense of self through convening an inclusive, intersectional community, where members nurture one another.

“Duchamp & Sons impacted me hugely, it was a safe space to discuss ideas, and practice critical thinking, interact with peers and professionals working in the industry. Being in the group grew my soft skills, presenting, group work. I'm really grateful to the gallery for providing this space, it shaped who I am as a person.”

Further to this, some alumni have commented on how D&S became a space for them to find and develop their political voice. The time spent in sessions thinking through contemporary, societal themes and considering how members' views and lived experience can be used in art-

² Membership of D&S is prioritised for those from Tower Hamlets and surrounding East London boroughs, and from backgrounds underrepresented in the arts i.e. disabled and neurodivergent, from the global majority, and from lower income households. Tower Hamlets has one of the fastest growing populations in the UK (2021 Census and later projections) as well as the highest rate of child poverty in London at 48% (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2024).

making contributes to this, and has led to recent work by the group tackling migration, the housing crisis, and access to public space.

Duchamp & Sons has also expanded some people's sense of what an artist or creative can be. One interviewed alum mentioned how she had very 'narrow and curriculum focused' idea of what artists were like, and D&S helped her see that working as an artist could be fun. Another alum recalled working with Jenny Moore's experimental and interdisciplinary practice — "she normalised the crazy process of being an artist." These moments offer glimpses into how D&S opens up the idea of what an artist's life looks like and, in turn provides room for young people to see this life as a possible path for themselves.

In their interview Gaby Sahhar, who was a Duchamp & Sons member before later returning to work with the group as a guest artist in 2022-23, cited bell hooks' critical consciousnesses centres when reflecting on D&S, as places for people to meet, be educated and break outside of binaries. "So many categories are put onto young people, and [Duchamp & Sons] can be a space to change that for young people, to break down some of the binaries and categories they feel penned in by".

"I learnt not to be so precious about the work I produced, and that in an established institution you could still play — just chuck stuff at a wall and see what sticks, which may sound pessimistic but as a perfectionist that lesson has honestly kept me going. I learnt how wholesome communities within the arts can be."

"I had such a brilliant experience [...] the creative buzz was amazing! It made me value working in a team, how brainstorming even wild ideas can be really productive and create something amazing. Being in Duchamp & Sons, where there was such a supportive and non-hierarchical group, helped build my confidence and bring out my creative voice."

96% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'I felt my contributions were listened to and respected'



Duchamp & Sons x Sophie Mallett (2016), image by Justyna Fedec

On Wellbeing...

Every Duchamp & Sons member we spoke to said they enjoyed being a part of the collective, and the value of this sense of enjoyment and fun shouldn't be understated. One alum shared "with D&S what I really remember is just having fun" whilst another noted that the most valuable thing about D&S was having an outlet from school, a "release of your mind".

With recent reports indicating 1 in 5 young people aged 8-25 face a probable mental health disorder³, we know that there is a growing mental health crisis amongst young people, which is compounded by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as anxiety around the climate, social media, and cost of living, and youth programmes must be prepared to encounter this.

When asked about the highlight of D&S, one alum answered "the snacks [...] those little moments with everybody, just the unserious, funny things". The chance for young people to share space and socialise in an environment distinct from the pressure of education or responsibilities, is something some may only be able to access in an environment like Duchamp & Sons. One past Curator: Youth Programmes recalls how some members faced pressure from their family to follow certain career paths, but Duchamp & Sons offered a space to escape this pressure and feel 'this is my space, I'm in control here'.

Strong pastoral provision and compassionate staff members are essential to creating environments which are supportive for young people's wellbeing and mental health, but alongside this, in the case of Duchamp & Sons, it appears that a self-sustaining peer community rooted in joy and care is just as vital.

³ Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2023. NHS England, Leeds.

One of the Research Assistants reflected “I think I’ve known D&S is a radical space for young creatives without actually understanding why but [these interviews have] brought that into focus — it’s the way the group prioritises community care and collaboration for the benefit of everyone within and out of the collective. And I think it’s incredible that, through various staff changes, members coming and going, and changes within the gallery, that has stayed consistent throughout.”

“Just hanging out with the group and not working too intensely was nice. It felt really relaxing in comparison to everything else in life that was and still is stressful.”

“It’s become the foundation of my journey as an artist, it was a safe space and new community that I could share the most important thing in my life with which is art, as my current community being Muslim and Bengali just didn’t understand”

100% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement ‘I enjoyed being a member of Duchamp & Sons’

*Art Casino with Ruth Proctor
(2015)*



Relational Impacts

Friendship & Peer Mentoring

Reflecting on Duchamp & Sons Paul Crook, previous Curator: Youth & Community Programmes at the Gallery, said “the biggest thing out of all of it was the personal connections...that’s the thing that rings the truest now”. Paul highlighted the importance of these connections being made in a ‘third space’ outside of young people’s normal educational or home settings, which meant that the group became a ‘melting pot’, where young people who might not otherwise meet could learn from one another and form friendships.

One alum remembers D&S “really encouraged me to come out of my shell [...]. Different people’s identities shone in a way that they didn’t at school. At school it felt quite uniform but [in D&S] I was learning about all different identities, and was able to mingle with different people interested in different things from all parts of the world. There was a diversity of thought like never before”.

Here we see how not only do collectives like Duchamp & Sons offer space for developing firm friendships — with many D&S members commenting how they are still in touch with friends from the group — but also space for young people to expand their world views, their community networks, and knowledge bases.

Another alum remembers there was a “developmental relationship” between members, as you’d see someone “exactly like you” doing something or “putting themselves out there” which would give you the confidence to feel able to do the same yourself.

Spending time in the space, the informal peer mentoring is always evident whether that’s seeing a member encourage another to approach an activity in a new way, or the often energised conversations about university options, job applications, or life choices. In Duchamp & Sons, the community celebrates each others’ wins and offers a non-judgemental listening ear in tougher times.

“D&S is an easy way to gauge what the arts is actually like, and to be able to access the art in a way that is light, fun, and where no one is bluffing. You get to do it with a cool group of people at different ages and career points. You can bounce off them in terms of knowledge [...] You have this peer collective group where you can get an understanding of what you want to do.”

“Having a safe and open space to experiment, explore, ask questions and play alongside other like-minded creatives helped me build confidence and reinforced the path I want to take in life. Best of all, it led me to some wonderful, life-long friends!”

"The main impact for me was fun, it was getting time and space to access creative activities for free with my friends and peers doing quite often strange and wacky projects. [...] I still keep in touch with many of my peers.”



Duchamp & Sons with Rosie Ridgway (2019), image by Dan Weill

A Collaborative Community

Central to Duchamp & Sons is collaboration. For many, this naturally supported the development of their communication and collaboration skills, but for others it also exposed the importance and function of a collaborative creative community in their future endeavours.

One interviewed alum who spoke about their lack of enjoyment for group work whilst at school remembered how Duchamp & Sons “had collaboration ingrained into every project [...] we were learning how to be a community, how to work together, how to take on everyone’s ideas and create something as a group but yet, still as an individual, you could see yourself in it [...] when you learn a skill like that, you can get very far in life”.

“We were learning how to be a community” encapsulates so much — a youth collective is not a space young people simply exist in, and community is not taught, instead they are built, nurtured and navigated together. Being in community with others teaches us so much about our own needs and the needs of others, about our positionality, our compassion, and our interpersonal skills. It is vital.

Another alum highlighted how this has directly impacted their own artistic practice “I now work within a collective which I hadn't dreamt of previously, and have built a different view of art than the 'white cube' vibe but as a social process.”

The community of Duchamp & Sons extends far beyond the current cohort and the walls of Whitechapel Gallery, it exists in the enduring friendships made within the collective, in the new

communities founded on the skills alumni developed within sessions, and within the continuing connection between alumni and the collective.

Perhaps most importantly, this feeling of community brings with it a sense of inclusion, both within a group of like-minded peers and the wider gallery environment. For many D&S was their first in-depth experience with the art world, and for that experience to be a positive one, underscored by a sense of welcome and acceptance is hugely impactful.

“It taught me so much about community amongst my peers whilst trying to navigate early adulthood”

“D&S taught me to turn up, whatever the workshop or space, just be with people and see what happens, it's ok to be uncomfortable - I still follow that today.”

Feeling Supported

The sense of feeling supported by this community, and the Whitechapel Gallery staff facilitating the collective is clear from the testimonies of alumni.

One alum reflected “everyone was free to be themselves”, something not everyone was able to do within their home or education settings. This sense of welcomeness to express oneself speaks to the feeling of safety many members experienced within the collective, which formed strong foundations for them to develop their confidence and sense of self.

Another alum remembers “the staff that ran it really cared” and were “passionate” about the group, with 98% of those surveyed agreeing with the statement ‘I felt supported by the staff’. This feeling of support creates relationships of trust between D&S members and staff which can lead to young people feeling more able to advocate for themselves and their needs in the youth collective setting and beyond.

Several alumni commented how they have felt able and welcome to get back in touch with the Curator: Youth Programmes after leaving the group and ask for advice or support, or to open up a dialogue about their current circumstances. One alum, who got back in touch with the Gallery a couple of years ago seeking advice about career pathways, reflects “I think that that has been really the most meaningful outcome of D&S for me — to feel like I can still ask for support even as someone in their 20s who hasn't been part of the programme for nearly a decade.”

Others spoke about how this support from staff manifested into real world opportunities from receiving mentorship whilst making applications to courses, to being encouraged to put themselves forward for programmes, to being offered paid work opportunities.

“I recommend D&S, if you want to be heard and have the freedom to express yourself”

“I always felt listened to and valued as a member of the group”



*Whitechapel Gallery Cafe
1985 - 2007, Duchamp & Sons
with Wright & Vandame
(2018), image by Rob Harris*

Professional Impacts

Gaining insight and making more informed and empowered decisions

78% of those surveyed said that Duchamp & Sons impacted choices they made about their career, study choices or pathways.

For many members, their experience with Duchamp & Sons is their first close encounter with a contemporary art gallery and in turn the wider creative sector. Working in this long term capacity with a gallery, building relationships with the staff and artists there, and developing creative work which forms a part of the Gallery's programme, exposes members to the varying ways of working in visual art and offers valuable insight.

One alum reflects "Duchamp & Sons opened up a new world for me: I got to learn about the inner workings of a gallery", and another "being part of D&S has been formative to my understanding of what opportunities there are in the arts (and) how creative industries work". Programmes like this offer a vantage point from which young people can see and begin to embody and test out what a creative future might feel like for them.

Of course, an interest in a creative career is one of the reasons people join Duchamp & Sons in the first place; the collective isn't necessarily the reason they choose a creative pathway, but as one alum puts it D&S "strengthened my conviction to carry on in that path".

However, for some, time spent in the collective exposed them to pathways they weren't previously aware of or planning to pursue. One alum shares "I probably would not have

developed an interest or pursued a career in youth work if I hadn't been a member of D&S". Others shared how D&S led them to apply for and secure jobs in gallery learning, how they came to realise their love for facilitation, and how they "used to think the roles of artist and curator had to be kept separate, but D&S helped show that there is room to pursue both."

Making more informed choices equally means being able to articulate what is and what is not right for you. One alum says that Duchamp & Sons made her "more confident in choosing not going to art school" after gaining insight into the experience from peers, and instead she's now exploring a future working in museums or archives saying "I didn't realise there were these kind of jobs [...] It made me think of the art world in a different way, [to] think about it [as] a non-linear world".

Gaining insight into a sector means more than just understanding the various job and study options which exist, it also means being able to make an empowered choice based on your lived experience. We know arts settings can feel austere and unwelcoming, we know that cultural institutions are often built from histories of violence, we know that people from marginalised backgrounds are underrepresented in the arts and culture workforce. As one alum puts it "our survival mechanisms have to come first and foremost" when making choices and speaking to family about pursuing careers.

Several alumni commented on how being part of the collective allowed them to see gallery spaces as welcoming, as something they could be a part of and enact power within, with one summing it up — "it made me see what might be an exclusive entity (the art world) as warm and possible to be a part of". Experiencing representation within staffing, guest artists, and the makeup of the collective itself is key to this fostering this sense of welcome, as is providing young people with agency in varying forms whether through an ID pass to be able to access reciprocal gallery entry offers, or being able to devise their own creative work.

"It has had an undoubtable impact on my interest in visual art and in how to make that into a career. As someone who moved to the UK at a formative age, it helped me find myself in a new cultural landscape and make connections."

"Duchamp & Sons opened up a new world for me: I got to learn about the inner workings of a gallery, speaking with staff from all departments and working directly with artists to conceptualise, create, install and exhibit work in real life. It's rare for a youth collective to be given such freedom and autonomy, so it was a huge honour to have Whitechapel Gallery fully support and believe in us."

"Interacting with a wide range of diverse people, both the artists and gallery workers as well as other members, opened my eyes to the range of things I could do with my life"

"It's helped me to carve out a career in the arts and culture sector, something I would not have been able to do before (for lack of knowing about what roles existed out there and also not having the support to go for it)."

Alone Together: Youth Forum with Seth Pimlott (2018), image by Renee Odjidja.



Gaining relevant skills

Youth collective programmes like Duchamp & Sons are spaces for open experimentation, for imagining, for play, discussion and debate — they are learning spaces, though not of the didactic kind. What members report leaving the group with are emergent skills relevant to their careers, whatever they may choose to do, and to their broader lives.

One member commented “I felt like I was one step ahead in critical thinking when I went to university”. Similarly another alumni identified the most valuable part of Duchamp & Sons as “being unafraid to talk about my ideas” because D&S was such an open and accepting space, where ‘any idea is a good idea’ which ultimately meant they felt more confident when they progressed to university, particularly as someone from the Bengali community.

These critical thinking, communication and public speaking skills are fundamental to many creative and non-creative pathways, and for some young people these are skills youth collectives offer access to when schools cannot.

One alum reflects: “the most useful thing was getting those skills which aren’t unfortunately taught at school: working in a professional environment, creating something together, building confidence to say what you think is good. [...] We were treated like adults, so it was really different from school. In these settings you’re really encouraged to think and speak your mind, and be respectful of everyone else in the group. When I joined work, I felt prepared”.

The true number of skills young people have developed as part of D&S is hard to quantify, they vary from project to project, from person to person but tales of gaining skills in debate,

facilitation, research, teamwork, adaptability, relationship building, problem solving, planning and organisation are plentiful, as are those of specific artistic approaches from printmaking to sound-editing, archiving to curating and beyond. These skills are useful in all walks of life, but also serve to strengthen members' CVs and future applications, as does the very experience of being a part of a regular youth collective programme at a well-known art gallery.

Previous Curator: Youth Programmes Renee Odjidja sums it up as “even if they didn’t end up working in the arts, it’s about the skills they learnt, even just the ability to step into an art gallery in the future. I can see the impact of it in the future, that next generation being able to step through the doors of a gallery too.”

“It opened up a whole world of creative opportunities. I learnt more about the art world in Duchamp & Sons than I did studying creative subjects at university. I got real-world skills about working in a gallery, working in a group on projects and creative pursuits, working with artists, working in public settings. I gained confidence in art settings, and have gained so much knowledge about contemporary arts.”

Pathways

Of those who got involved in our D&S alumni survey, 84% are currently working or pursuing work or study in the arts or associated sectors. Alumni have gone onto roles at Serpentine, the Royal Academy, V&A East, to work at local schools and community organisations, and to futures as artists, freelance creatives and much more.

As well as this, 100% said they were still connected with the arts through either sometimes or regularly attending programming at cultural institutions.



Duchamp & Sons x Jenny Moore (2013)

Key Learnings

From the research, we've discovered these key takeaways which will inform the future planning of Duchamp & Sons as a programme, but we hope these insights can also serve as useful insight, learnings, and pieces of advocacy for those working on collaborative youth programmes in different contexts.

The Importance of...

Community

Community is a central pillar of Duchamp & Sons, and its success. Members feeling enjoyment, supported, and able to make more empowered choices, could not happen without the sense of togetherness and collaboration which underscores the collective. This community stems from centring experimentation, exchange, and joy, whilst resisting prescribed outputs, as, in this way, members can shape the collective based on their own needs, interests, and experiences.

The grounding community of D&S creates an atmosphere of trust between members and collaborators, which also contributes to the dynamic artistic outputs of the group, as members feel confident to experiment with new mediums and do things for the first time whether that's curating an exhibition, programming a participatory event, or devising a performance work.

Other models of youth programming exist — youth boards, drop-in workshop series, training schemes — but it's clear that D&S's model which favours holding space for young people to be, create, and grow through collective acts is not only valued by the membership but also generates meaningful impact, and so there's no desire to change this.

*Duchamp & Sons x
Mohammed Z. Rahman (2024),
image by Anne Tetzlaff*



Agency

Several alumni commented on the importance of feeling a ‘collective ownership’ over projects. Prioritising this is vital, as it cements a sense of power in their collective voice and agency, which in turn supports individuals to feel able to advocate for themselves both within and outside of the group.

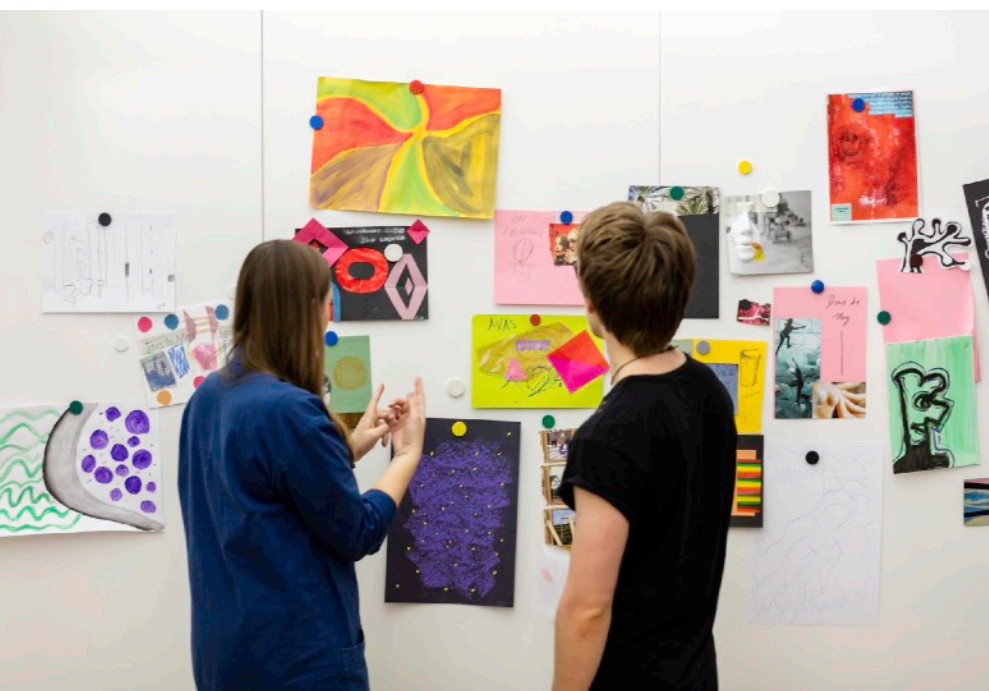
Others identified projects which led to large public outputs at the gallery as amongst their favourites, as they felt like these ‘legitimised’ their ideas and creative work. It’s not enough to simply provide space for creative experimentation behind closed doors, young people want to express their creative ideas on the same terms and with the same agency as other artists. Providing space for this is key for young people to feel that they have true stake within gallery spaces and their creative and critical voices are valued.

Openness & Experimentation

Many of the impacts of Duchamp & Sons seem to be inherently linked to the openness of the programme, in terms of the variety of artistic practices explored within it, the diversity of participants, the lack of pre-determined outcomes and, as alumni put it, the ‘any idea is a good idea’ ethos of the group.

This space for experimentation is something which is crucial to maintain and build upon moving forwards, as it sets the programme apart from formal education settings and other youth programmes which focus more on linearly taught skills progression. When young people learn this way, through open discovery, their sense of self-confidence thrives.

Sitting in the uncertainty and encouraging others to do the same is a core part of the Curator: Youth Programmes, or equivalent, role — by doing this, you hold space for true co-curation as through the chaos ideas ultimately emerge, coalesce, evolve and land.



Duchamp & Sons x Sam Curtis (2015), image by Dan Weill

What's needed...

More trust, agency and respect for young people

Ceding power to young people can lead to better creative projects, and ultimately to better institutions. However, often organisations do not create space for young people's perspectives to influence and enact organisational change.

Some D&S alumni commented on their desire to further influence the wider “eco-system” of the gallery, and their disappointment when their projects, which often present challenging, underrepresented or radical viewpoints, were not seen as “springboard for new potentials”.

By creating spaces where young people's voices are truly listened to and respected, organisations could learn so much, particularly from youth collective members about non-hierarchical approaches, practice of care and community, and innovative approaches to art making. From this, organisations stand a better chance of being environments which this next generation believe in, see integrity within, and want to be a part of.

This respect for young people's voices must come from all parts of an organisation. In the case of D&S, some alumni and staff highlighted past difficulties with accessing marketing support for projects, members not always feeling welcome in the building, and efforts to avoid work with young people being undervalued or instrumentalised by colleagues. If a welcome is not holistic, that is felt distinctly by young people which can undermine the impact of programmes like youth collectives. Organisations must leave room to interrogate whether trust, agency and respect is something truly felt by their youth audience — and if not, how to change this.

“Having a youth group and not using that to present other views is a conservative position and limits the potential of what the gallery could offer”

*Youth Takeover (2019), image
by Rob Harris*



Better resourcing for youth programmes

The financial (and emotional) resource required to run youth collectives rooted in co-curation, is often underestimated by those who hold the metaphorical purse strings. Creating supportive pastoral environments, dynamic creative outputs, and holding room for experimentation is valuable work, and deserves to be allocated appropriate resources which reflect the true cost of the work and are par with those allocated to 'traditional' art making.

Funding and flexible budgets which account for slower, emergent creative processes, for space for experimentation and change, for ambitious outputs, and for the proper pastoral support of young people are essential for creating successful, collaborative youth programmes.

This also extends to properly resourcing staff working in collaborative programmes with young people, who all too often experience fatigue from solo delivery, working with limited resources, and needing to constantly advocate for the integrity of such work which remains undervalued by the sector.

Building in additional support staff generates more space for lead staff to spend on imagining more innovative creative work, and ensuring best practice in terms of inclusion, safeguarding, and collaboration, which then has positive ripple effects on an organisation as whole.

Listening to what young people are telling us they need

A successful youth programme is a relevant one. Responding to the question 'what support do you think is needed right now for young people interested in art and the creative sector?', young people told us they need:

1. **Insight and Information:** Young people often feel they aren't able to find the information they need about creative careers in schools, or to gain experience which is relevant to the sector like curation, collaboration skills, and knowledge about freelance pathways.

What is needed: Diverse and representative youth programmes and mentorship schemes which offer insight into arts environments and careers. Resources and events which demystify job roles, tax returns, networking, funding applications. Strong links between schools and arts organisations in order to knowledge share.

2. **Career and Financial Support:** Several alumni mentioned the stigma that "art isn't a viable future" financially. For some, this reputation alone meant that family and peers were less likely to encourage or support them to follow a creative career pathway. More so, the issue lay in the reality of the financial landscape in the arts — pay is relatively low, employment can be tough to secure, and living costs are mounting. As one alum put it, "it's difficult to think about your future as sustainable".

What is needed: Secure jobs, better pay, paid traineeships, paid residencies, affordable studio spaces, and resources around career development and funding avenues.

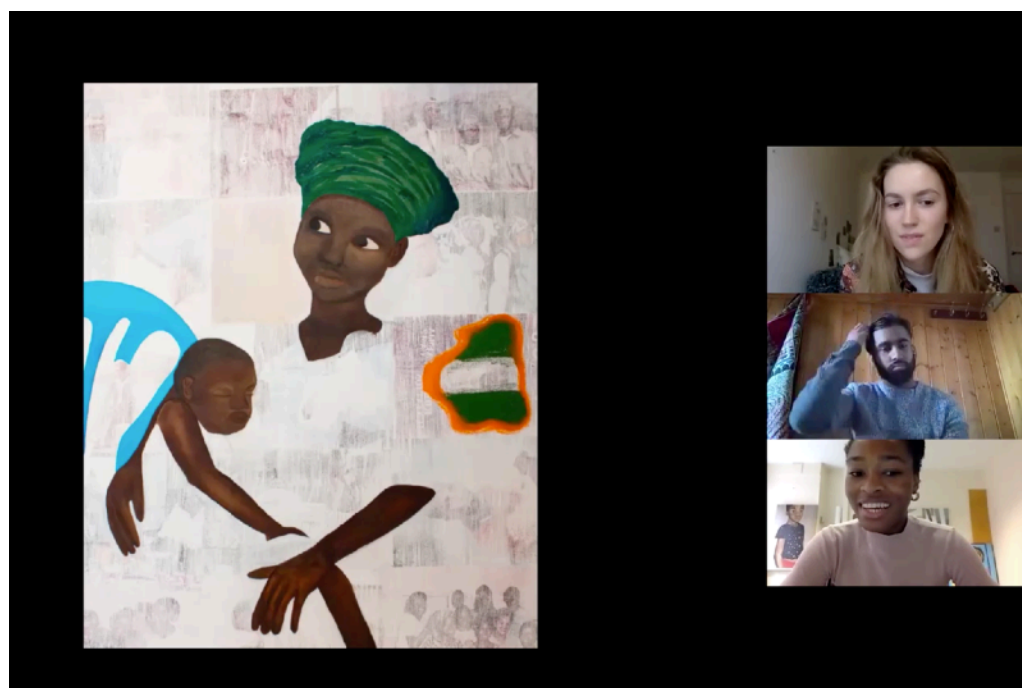
3. **Supportive Environments:** One alum who now works in a college stressed how young people today are feeling incredibly pressured by exam expectations and ultimately need a “break and freedom to express their creative selves”. For young people to engage with art, and the possibility of a future career in the sector, we must prioritise their wellbeing before all else.

What is needed...Youth spaces rooted in care and compassion, room to experiment free from deadlines and formal structures, programmes which prioritise social and emotional impacts rather than simply career outputs, and public art organisations which acknowledge wellbeing as a part of their mission.



*Mapping the Studio (2022)
with Shepherd Manyika,
image by Anne Tetzlaff*

*Virtual Studio Visit with Tobi
Alexandra Falade (2021)*



Space for Reflection

We'd like to invite you to consider the below questions and prompts in your own context. These are questions which have emerged for us as researchers throughout this process, and we hope form the basis for further reflection and learning.

You might want to do this through free-writing, a group conversation, drawing, crafting, or perhaps taking yourself for a wander.

What brings your community together?

How do you hold space for joy?

What potentials emerge for you when you resist set outcomes and welcome uncertainty?

What do you need to feel supported?

What does it feel, sound, look, and taste like to be listened to?

How do we make room for radical resistance?

**Being part of a collective, is being in community with others.
What might that look like for you? What does it feel like?
What do you need? What can you offer?**

**Map the hierarchies you exist in,
What possibilities occur when you
shift or collapse these?**

What makes up a meaningful collaboration?

What does it mean to empower, rather than tolerate youth voice?

**Think of something which sparked your creative
curiosity. Share it.**

What does a sustained sanctuary look like?

How do we build and sustain relationships rooted in trust?

Collective Acts: Ingredients List

Here are some of the essential ingredients which make up Duchamp & Sons.

Care and consideration

Space for radical ideas

Snacks (good ones)

Time for chatting

Experimenting

Encouragement

Uncertainty

££

A bit of chaos (the positive kind)

Breaks

Giving it a go

Silliness

Every idea is a good idea ethos

Collaboration

Questioning

Respect

Doing what we can in the time that we have

Curiosity

Create your own ingredients list of what you would need to create your own collaborative, creative community.



Credits

Written and researched by **Amelia Oakley**, Curator: Youth Programmes, Whitechapel Gallery

Amelia has been Curator: Youth Programmes at Whitechapel Gallery since September 2021. She looks after the Gallery's youth work including Duchamp & Sons, and other opportunities supporting the creative development of young people. Her work centres on creating spaces rooted in joy, exploring non-hierarchical organising structures, and championing exploratory learning and experimentation.

Additional research undertaken by Research Assistants and Duchamp & Sons Alumni, **Sara Ismail** and **Ansh Meeta**.

Sara is a creative producer from East London. She was part of Duchamp & Sons from 2016-2022 and has worked across various programmes centring the needs of young people and diverse communities in the creative and cultural sector. She currently works at V&A East as a Learning Producer.

Ansh was a member of Duchamp & Sons from 2018-2022. He is now a youth worker and occasional freelancer in the creative sector, and his time in the collective has been hugely influential on his professional practice. Collaboration and community building for social change remain central to his personal and professional ethos.

With thanks to

The 48 D&S alumni who responded to the 15 Year Research Survey, representing around 26% of all alumni. Plus, the ten D&S alumni who took part in interviews — Dwaynica, Mohammed, Novuyo, Niquelle, Nishi, Roshni, Sadika, Sonam, Sumaiya, and Yasmin.

The five past contributing artists who were interviewed as part of the research, Lady Lucy (2010-11), Ruth Proctor (2015), Seth Pimlott (2018), Ayo Akingbade (2020-21), and Gaby Sahhar (2022-3) who is also alum of Duchamp & Sons.

The four past Whitechapel Gallery staff who have served in the Curator: Youth Programmes (or equivalent roles) and were interviewed for this research — Marijke Steedman, Paul Crook, Vicky Carmichael, and Renee Odjidja. Your insights have been invaluable, as has each of your pivotal work on this programme, criticality, and dedication to advocating for young creatives.

The current Whitechapel Gallery staff who participated in research workshops.

And the colleagues from Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, Camden Art Centre, Ikon Gallery, Leeds Art Gallery, Natural History Museum, Peer Gallery, The Photographers' Gallery, Royal Academy of Art, Site Gallery, Tate, and Walker Art Center who spent time talking to us about their own contexts and programmes.

And finally, to all Duchamp & Sons members past and present. Your creative energy, your deep thinking, and collective imagination light fires everywhere.

**WE ARE
THE PAST.**

**WE ARE THE
PRESENT.**

**WE ARE
THE FUTURE.**

Front Page images, clockwise: Naming Project (2010); Mapping the Studio (2022) image by Anne Tetzlaff; Escape the Slick (2023) image by Nina Robinson, Youth Takeover (2019) image by Rob Harris.

Final page image: Moving Grounds: 15 Years of Duchamp & Sons (2025) image by James Sutton.