



COLLECTIVE

ACTS:

REFLECTIONS

ON

15

YEARS

OF

DUCHAMP

&

SONS



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, and what we can all learn from a space 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, about their experiences.

We hope this booklet offers useful insights 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.

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With thanks to all those who have taken part in the surveys, interviews, and workshops as part of the 15 Years of Duchamp & Sons research process. And to all Duchamp & Sons members, Gallery staff, and participating artists, past and present, for building this community with us.

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Designed by Rachel Littlewood

WHAT IS DUCHAMP & SONS?

Duchamp & Sons is a collective for 15-24 year olds, consisting of around twenty members from in and around East London. It focuses on creating a joyful and supportive space for co-curation and creative experimentation. D&S regularly collaborate with artists on projects, visit exhibitions and studios, and present jointly devised original work at Whitechapel Gallery.

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.

(...)

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

Extract from Duchamp & Sons Manifesto (2017)

A TIMELINE

Duchamp & Sons began in 2010, at a time when peer-led youth programmes were growing in popularity. Education programmes have been a part of the Gallery's offer since it's 1901 inception, however it was not until the early 2000s that a dedicated youth programme emerged.

2006 - 2009

Various short-term youth project pilots take place.

2010 - 2013

A new regular youth programme begins in January 2010, with the name 'Duchamp & Sons' chosen by the group. It initially includes workshops, visits, and artist collaborations.

2014 - 2017

D&S collaborate with Steven Morgana & Nick Wood to create *De/Construct* (2014) – the first full scale exhibition at Whitechapel Gallery developed by the collective. They also collaborate with artists including Ruth Proctor, Sam Curtis, Sophie Mallett, Ruth Beale, and Chiara Ambrosio during these years.

2018 - 2021

D&S create the exhibition *Alone Together* (2018) with Seth Pimlott. They also devise an installation with Wright & Vandame, gallery takeovers, and an EP with Rosie Ridgway.

In 2020 while working with Ayo Akingbade, the pandemic hits and D&S moves online until Autumn 2021. During this time, the collective open two new exhibitions at Whitechapel Gallery, and also curate and host online Studio Visits.

2022 - 2025

In 2022, the collective work with Shepherd Manyika, and later with D&S alum Gaby Sahhar with whom they develop the exhibition *Escape the Slick* (2023). Since then, they've collaborated on projects with Knead, Mohammed Z. Rahman, and most recently with Holly Graham on *Moving Grounds: 15 Years of Duchamp & Sons* (2025).

IMPACTS

We've spoken to over fifty Duchamp & Sons alumni, here's what we've learnt about the impact the experience has had on them.

PERSONAL IMPACTS

ON CONFIDENCE

Feeling more confident to express ideas, spend time with others, and try new things cropped up time and time again when speaking to alumni.

'Your voice is heard, everyone there listens to you', reflected one member. This sense of acceptance and validation is so important; 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 better know their own voice.

For others, it was the 'no pressure' vibe of D&S which nurtured this growth in confidence. By creating freedom for young people to fluidly adjust the role they choose to play within a room, their confidence in knowing and exercising their agency, and expressing their needs in group settings grows.

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

ON SENSE OF SELF

For many, being part of Duchamp & Sons contributed to the development of their creative and critical voices.

By participating in artistic experimentation, young people get to connect with and explore their opinions, politics, and lived experience. The opportunity to stage public sharings of their creative work is also crucial, as it creates space for their perspectives to feel represented and in turn validated.

For others, D&S expanded ideas of what a creative life might look like. Several alumni commented that meeting artists from different backgrounds and with interdisciplinary practices opened up possibilities of what their own lives and creative futures could involve.

"It had a massive part in building my confidence in my creativity and sense of self."

ON WELLBEING

One alum shared, 'with D&S what I really remember is just having fun' whilst another noted that the most valuable thing was having an outlet from school, a 'release of your mind'. For many the ultimate highlight of D&S is that it is a social space, rooted in joy and care.

We know there is know that there is a growing mental health crisis amongst young people. Spaces for fun, socialising, and finding respite from the pressures of education, home, and daily life are more needed than ever.

"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"

RELATIONAL IMPACTS

FRIENDSHIP & PEER MENTORING

One past Curator: Youth Programmes observed 'the biggest thing out of all of it was the personal connections...that rings the truest now'.

Not only do collectives like Duchamp & Sons offer space for developing firm friendships, but they also create space for young people to expand their community networks and knowledge bases by meeting peers outside of their immediate circles.

These friendships also often lead to informal peer mentoring. Spending time in a D&S session, you'll often see members encouraging each other to try something new, or collectively wrangling with university options, job applications, or life choices. It's a community that celebrates each others' wins and offers a non-judgemental listening ear in tougher times.

"I learnt how wholesome communities within the arts can be"

"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."

FINDING A COLLABORATIVE COMMUNITY

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

One alum reflected 'we were learning how to be a community'. Youth collectives are not communities young people simply exist in; instead they are ones they build, nurture and navigate together. Being in community with others teaches us so much about our shared needs, our positionality, our compassion, and our interpersonal skills. It is vital.

Perhaps most importantly, this feeling of community brings with it a sense of inclusion both within a group of like-minded peers and the 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 significant.

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

FEELING SUPPORTED

Several alumni reflected that they felt free and welcome to be themselves in D&S. This seems intrinsically linked to being supported by those working on the programme, with alumni commenting that the staff 'really cared' and that they felt listened to and trusted.

Relationships of trust between young people and staff are key to people feeling more able to advocate for themselves and their needs in the youth collective setting and beyond.

For many, this feeling endures after they leave the collective with several alumni commenting how they have felt welcome to get back in touch with the Curator: Youth Programmes years after leaving the group to ask for support.

PROFESSIONAL IMPACTS

MAKING MORE INFORMED CHOICES

78% of those surveyed said that D&S impacted choices they made about their future pathways. One alum reflects: 'it opened up a new world for me: I got to learn about the inner workings of a gallery'. 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.

An interest in a creative career is one of the reasons people join D&S; the collective isn't necessarily the reason they choose a creative pathway, but as one alum puts it, it 'strengthened my conviction'. For others, D&S exposed them to roles they weren't previously aware of, for example in gallery learning.

Making more informed choices equally means being able to articulate 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 learning about other options.

Others highlighted how D&S allowed them to see galleries as welcoming, as something they could be a part of and enact power within — 'it made me see what might be an exclusive entity as warm and possible to be a part of'.

"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, in a group on projects and creative pursuits, with artists, in public settings. I gained confidence in art settings, and have gained so much knowledge about contemporary arts."

GAINING SKILLS

Collectives like Duchamp & Sons are spaces for open experimentation, for imagining, for play, discussion and debate, and ultimately for learning.

What members report leaving the group with are the skills which emerge from this kind of exploratory experience like teamwork, research, adaptability, planning and more. Not to mention the specific creative skills they may learn from curation to printmaking, archiving to editing and beyond.

One member commented 'I felt like I was one step ahead in critical thinking when I went to university', while another identified the most valuable part 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'.

These critical thinking and communication skills are fundamental to many creative and non-creative pathways, and for some young people these are skills youth collectives offer access to when other settings might not.

One alum sums it up: "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. [...] 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".

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.

LEARNINGS

We've pulled out some key research learnings which will inform future planning of D&S, and we hope are useful for others working on building collaborative spaces.

THE IMPORTANCE OF...

COMMUNITY

Community is central to D&S. Feeling joyful, supported, and able to make more empowered choices, could not happen without the sense of togetherness and collaboration which underscores the collective.

The structure of D&S which favours holding space for young people to be, create, and grow together through collective acts supports this and is really valued by members.

AGENCY

Ensuring young people feel a sense of 'collective ownership' over projects is crucial. Not only does it make for exciting creative work, but it cements a sense of power in collective voice and agency.

It's also not enough to simply provide space for creative play behind closed doors; young people want to express their creative ideas on the same terms and with the same agency as other artists. Providing opportunities for public outputs, and celebrating these, is key for young people to feel that they have true stake within organisations and that their voices are valued.

OPENNESS & EXPERIMENTATION

Many of the impacts of D&S seem to be inherently linked to the openness of the programme, in terms of the variety of artistic practices explored, the lack of pre-determined outcomes and the 'any idea is a good idea' ethos.

Space for experimentation is core to the work, as it sets youth collectives apart from formal education settings. When young people learn this way, through open discovery, their sense of self-confidence thrives.

"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"

WHAT'S NEEDED...

What is needed from arts organisations to sustain and nurture youth programmes now, and in the future?

MORE TRUST AND AGENCY 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 structural change. Organisations could learn so much from youth collective members about non-hierarchical approaches, care practices, and building arts organisations young people want to be a part of long term.

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 on par with those allocated to 'traditional' art making.

LISTENING TO WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE TELL 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 that they need: insight and information, through mentorship and creative career resources which demystify the sector; financial support to make art a viable future, meaning funded programmes, secure jobs, better pay, and affordable rent; and supportive spaces rooted in care and compassion.

REFLECTIONS

We invite you to consider these prompts in your own context. You might want to do this through free-writing, a group conversation, drawing, crafting, or perhaps taking yourself for a wander for quiet reflection.

What brings your community together?

How do you hold space for joy?

What does a sustained sanctuary look like?

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?

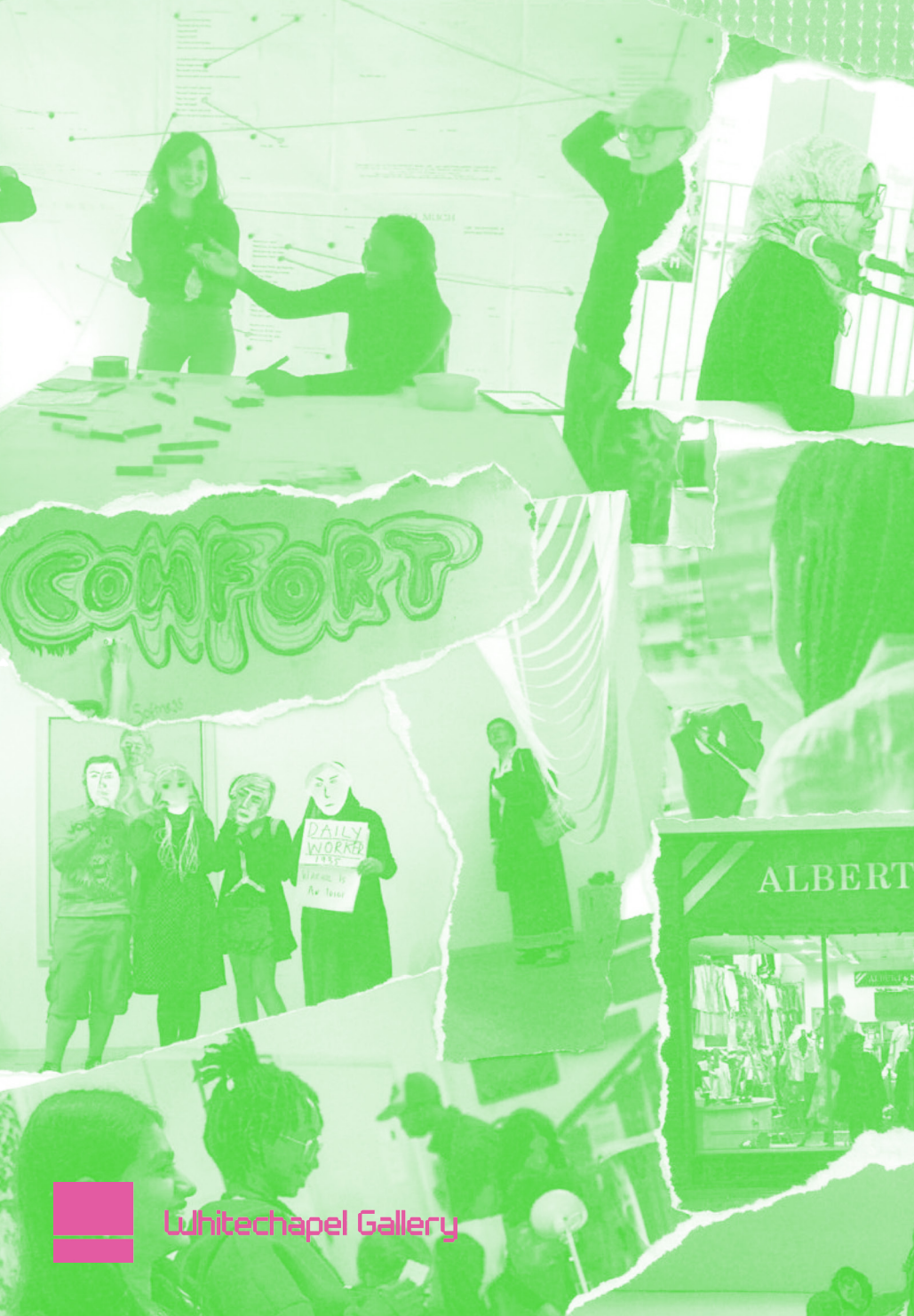
***Map the hierarchies you exist in.
What possibilities occur when you shift
or collapse these?***

What makes up a meaningful collaboration?

***How do we build and sustain
relationships rooted in trust?***

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

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



Whitechapel Gallery