

The team at John Hansard Gallery spoke to Re:action about the venue's wide-ranging project to reach out culturally across the city of Southampton.

COMMUNITY TAKEOVER

John Hansard Gallery (JHG) moved from Highfield campus into the city centre and reopened in Guildhall Square in May 2018. In early 2019, we appointed a new Engagement and Learning Team to open out, renew and strengthen our relationships with the local community. Community Takeover (CTO) is a result of this ongoing quest to evolve, be responsive to and expand our understanding of our place within the community and the city.

During May and June 2019, we invited a selection of different groups and organisations to take over our main gallery space for a few days each. These important partnerships included Skate Southampton, Southampton Women's Integration Group, Fashion Fest, Art Asia and local children who were involved in *Street Art*, alongside University researchers and departments.

Over nine weeks, our main gallery was transformed into a welcoming space where anyone could be creative. We employed 17 professional artists, who provided space for visitors to experiment and learn through making with clay, batik on silk banners, zine making, recording their voices or photographing skateboarders on ramps. There were demonstrations and talks celebrating skateboarding culture, promoting the *South Asian Mela Festival*, as well as a serious debate about the impact of fashion and textiles on the environment.

Fourteen members of the Women's Integration Group – mostly based in Southampton's Northam district and of Black, Asian and minority ethnicity – worked over several weeks with the artist Suna Imre creating beautifully handmade ceramics as part of *Shaping Clay*.

Communities explored concepts and issues such as sustainability, environment, diversity and inclusion and how they want to see and use their public spaces.

Steve Bega, from Skate Southampton, said: "Takeover gave us the opportunity to exhibit and engage with not only such a wide variety of our own community but also with a much wider audience. Visitors seemed to have a wide variety of reactions to the exhibit and were all-positive. Whether that

was a young family leaving excited that the artwork they painted on a skateboard was going to be ridden and seen by others during the summer, or an elderly lady feeling excited that a typically marginalised movement was given the spotlight to showcase its true colours."

CTO expanded the gallery's role and partnership with other departments within University of Southampton. Events included Pint of Science, Unesco International Day of Light, Women in Science, Engineering, Technology and Humanities+ (WiSET+) *Women in Academia* exhibition, and presentation by Professor Olivette Otele as part of the *Decolonising Knowledge* seminar series organised by the Centre for Transnational Studies and Centre for Imperial and Postcolonial Studies. These events brought the University of Southampton into the heart of the gallery and the city, attracting new audiences and participants to debate theoretical and practical academic approaches.

A significant highlight has been the collaboration with Dr Sarah Hayden on her AHRC-funded research project, *Voices in the Gallery* detailed on page 14. Over the course of two days, we hosted three focussed sessions. Firstly, to explore voice, vocality and listening, which offered participants a space to tune into the aesthetic, social and political dimensions of voice and voicing. The second workshop explored how language makes itself heard in art and in the gallery today through the exploration of works by the artist





“It was an amazing experience for us and for our ladies as well. Our ladies were very proud of their achievements. As a group, I know our ladies were pleased how welcomed they felt while at the Gallery. For some of them it was their first time to visit. We got amazing responses from the community, how people enjoyed seeing the work we have done together with JHG. Definitely we would love to do something with JHG again in future.”

Feedback from a Women’s Integration Group member

Laure Prouvost. Thirdly, we held a family friendly session with the sound artist Hannah Kemp-Welch who worked alongside Dr Hayden to imagine and record – in audio and as a zine – participants’ visions of their ideal gallery. The zines can still be enjoyed here: www.bit.ly/jhg-hkw

Community Takeover attracted over 6,500 visitors and over 1,020 people took part in talks, workshops and events. We have received overwhelmingly positive feedback from everyone who experienced and participated in the programme which attracted new visitors as well as excited our established audiences who were new to this way of presenting work.

So what’s next? We are planning two more Community Takeovers, and this time we are co-creating them with a community steering group, including members of the communities who are taking part.

Community Takeover #2: City of Sanctuary

Later this year, our main gallery will be transformed by a vibrant series of activities, displays and workshops by local groups, artists and partners. This takeover responds to our forthcoming exhibition *Mariner: A painted ship upon a painted ocean* that is part of our contribution to Mayflower 400 and explores Southampton’s status as a City of Sanctuary.

Community Takeover #3: Environment and Sustainability

From 26 September to 17 October 2020 our main gallery will again be a transformed by a series of activities, displays and workshops in response to the exhibitions *Seaside: Photographed* (31 October 2020 to 16 January 2021) and *Derek Jarman: Queer Nature* (Spring 2021) through the theme of Environment and Sustainability.

We hope you can join us. Evaluation and feedback from these projects will feed into the ongoing Connecting Cultures research project led by Louise Coysh, Associate Director (Arts and Culture) and Dr Ronda Gowland-Pryde, Public Engagement Spectrum Manager and Senior Engagement Fellow. More on that project on pages 4 and 5.



Above: Skate Southampton, Community Takeover.
Photo: Darren Tate

1 Shaping Clay, Community Takeover, 2019

2 Skate Southampton, Design Your Own Board workshop, Community Takeover, 2019

3 (WISSET+) Women in Academia exhibition, John Hansard Gallery, 2019